

THE LONDON READER

of Literature, Science, Art, and General Information.

[ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.]

No. 1696.—VOL. LXVI.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING NOVEMBER 2, 1895.

[PRICE ONE PENNY.]



VIVIEN FLED FROM GASTON'S ARMS AND STOOD, LIKE A GUILTY CREATURE, IN AN ANGLE OF THE WALL.

JOHN STAUNTON'S WIFE.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

DESPITE the cheerful crackle of the coals, and the vivid tongues of flame which leapt and danced hilariously up the chimney, onesomewhat cherished an uncomfortable suspicion that the fire had not long been kindled upon a hearth less carefully swept and polished than usual, for the little breakfast-room at Westlands (which usually wore so bright and cosy an aspect at the matutinal meal) felt cold and drear this wretched morning.

Albeit the chandelier was lighted above the groaning table, and the urn hissed, and the crisp, buttered toast emitted a fragrant aroma, and something hot and savoury simmered under a gleaming silver cover.

The fact nevertheless remained that it was not

yet seven o'clock of a raw November morning, as the insidious fog, creeping in through every imaginable crevice, and penetrating to one's lungs and the very marrow of one's bones, effectually reminded all human creatures who had been sufficiently indiscreet to quit the shelter of blankets and eider-downs thus prematurely.

That indescribable air of oppression, inseparable from impending farewells, moreover, hung heavy as a lowering cloud—upon the domestic horizon.

"Eat your chop whilst it is hot, John; and those are kidneys, I fancy, under the cover. Yes, broiled to perfection; and I must insist on your demolishing at least a couple of eggs. Remember, it is very doubtful when or where you next enjoy a meal!"

"But, indeed, I can hardly choke down a mouthful. Don't worry me, please! Let me have my own way, Josie, for the last time. I'll trouble you for another cup of coffee, however, without cream, dear. Yes, just a dash of brandy in it. Phang! one needs something down one's throat

to keep out this terrible atmosphere! There's a silver lining to every cloud, and some consolation in the thought that I shall soon be shot, at any rate, of these infernal British fogs!"

As John Staunton spoke, emulating an indifference it was all too evident he did not feel, his glance wandered towards a silent figure half-buried in the depths of the big elbow-chair drawn close to the fire.

And even as he received the steaming cup from his sister-in-law's white hand he was too absent-minded even to murmur the curt, stereotyped monosyllable of recognition which was at least her due.

"Will you not have some coffee, Vivien? It will not spoil your appetite for breakfast later, and—"

"No thanks!"

Even as she spoke "Vivien" shivered slightly, and drew the folds of her elaborately-broidered peignoir more closely about her slender figure.

The tiny toes of gold-embroidered Turkish slippers were just visible beneath the hem of that

dainty garment, and for a moment they stirred— impatiently it seemed— whilst their owner vouchsafed this laconic response to her husband's question.

But Vivien herself still gazed fixedly into the flames, one white hand buried among the tawny, unbound gold of those luxuriant tresses rippling down her back far below her slender waist, for she had made but a hasty toilette, and attempted no coiffure.

The long hair was simply brushed back from her milk-white brow, and confined with a comb at the back of that small, perfectly-shaped head, which might well have graced the shoulders of Milo's world-famed Venus.

A moment later Staunton rose, to seek outside in the hall (he said) the Bradshaw which was all the while in the pocket of his long-tailed travelling coat.

Then Miss Prior glided swiftly round to her sister's side, and bending down over the back of her chair she whispered, hurriedly,—

"Vivien! dear Vivien! rouse yourself! Make some slight effort! Your apathy gives you an air of indifference, which I am sure you cannot feel. And only think how terrible for John at such a moment! Rouse yourself, dearest, if only for his sake!"

Before the young wife could vouchsafe reply John was back again, and, standing by the table now, was gulping down his scalding coffee.

"Will you oblige me, Vivien," he said, a moment later, in a voice of studious calm, "by going upstairs to your father's room and inquiring whether there is any admittance for me? It is later than I thought. I must be off almost immediately. It would be a pity, therefore, for him to struggle down at this unreasonable hour!"

Vivien rose up with that ostentatious air of obedience and exaggerated deference which some fair belligerents know so well how to assume at a given moment, although they would die at their posts sooner than yield an ell of submission chanced to be foreign to their purpose.

She swept across the room, a tall, stately figure in her limp, blue draperies, passing her husband so closely by that the floating gold of her hair brushed his shoulder. Yet she did not even momentarily glance towards him.

An impressive shudder convulsed John Staunton's stalwart form, and he put the cup down hastily as the door closed upon his wife.

"Good Heavens! Josie, this is terrible! I must cut it short; self-control is rapidly deserting me! Promise me—promise me for the love of Heaven that you will guard her, shield her, save her from herself, not less than from every human ill and earthly peril!"

He had seized his sister-in-law by her slender wrists, and now gazed down passionately into her white, rigid face, for her eyes were studiously averted.

"I will do my best!" Josephine responded, in a low voice, and the simple words uttered in so faint a tone lacked none of the solemnity of a vow.

"I know you will! Heaven bless and aid you, child! Yours will be no facile task!" Then, half-unconsciously it seemed, John Staunton lent his head and pressed his lips to his sister's brow, as sign and seal of this solemn fraternal compact.

"Papa wishes you to go upstairs, John; he is only partially dressed!" It was Vivien's voice, and turning hastily as he released Josephine's cold hands, John Staunton's eyes met his wife's gaze. She was very pale, and shivered slightly; then she resumed her seat by the fire, and stretched her white fingers out towards the flame.

John Staunton bowed his head, and passed from the room without a word; then there was silence, absolute and unbroken, save for the monotonous "tick-tack" of the clock upon the mantelpiece.

"Vivien!" Josephine said at length, in a low, choked voice; "why—why do you put such cruel contrast upon your feelings! Your poor heart must be breaking; yet you sit there cold and impassive as a woman made of stone. Surely

—surely, you will unbend, if only for a moment before—before it is too late! Think only how John is suffering. Do not send him from you without one tender word or token that you are not in truth so callous, so frozen as you seem!" Josephine clasped her hands imploringly, catching her lip almost fiercely between her teeth; the words had come pouring hotly forth, tumbling one over another in low, agonized tones, and as the last syllable died away it left her breathless, spent, trembling in each slender limb from excess of emotion repressed.

The young wife laughed; yet what a hollow, dreary, mockery of mirth it was! There was neither smile on her lip nor light in her eyes—they gleamed dully, like tarnished steel.

"Let it suffice," she answered, strangely; "you are not cold, nor callous. You, at least, have given him a 'token' which, without doubt—"

But John himself entered the room at this juncture—his face was set and bloodless, as features chilled by death. Without a word he advanced towards Vivien, and as she rose involuntarily to her feet, he silently folded his wife in his arms, clasping her tightly for one long moment to his bursting heart.

But even then he did not speak. Vivien's white lips fluttered faintly for a breathing space, but the words—if words they were—died unspoken, smothered at their birth.

Releasing Vivien from that close embrace, John Staunton turned towards his sister-in-law: he passed his arm about her waist, he laid one hand upon her head, and fervently, as once before, he pressed a long caress upon her brow.

"John—John!" Josephine cried brokenly; "Heaven be with you, go where you may! and bring you back in safety—back to your wife and me!"

"Heaven keep you both!" he faltered, hoarsely; "Josie—dear Josie! remember your promise! Vivien, be true to yourself and me!"

Then he was gone like a lightning flash. Still the young wife never moved.

"Vivien!" Josephine cried, in a low choked voice, which emotion rendered well-nigh inaudible, "will you not follow him out? Have you nothing to say to John?"

Her voice was frenzied, her eyes were wild, like a waxwork figure; she held one arm uplifted rigidly, pointing—pointing towards the door.

Vivien slowly turned her head, and steadfastly returned her sister's gaze.

Then she burst into a tremulous laugh, but before she could find speech the hall-door closed with a loud report, the sound of wheels was heard upon the gravel, and the cab, piled high with the impedimenta of a transatlantic traveller, dashed past the rectory windows, and turned out through the open gate into the broad, high road.

Then a wild cry escaped Josephine's white lips. "Oh, Heaven!" she wailed; "Vivien! Vivien!"

But to that broken cry there came no response; the younger sister stood immovable with that strange dubious smile of mute derision frozen seemingly upon her lips.

One moment the gaze of these two women met; each looked questioninglly into the other's eyes, then Josephine fell forward fainting at her sister's feet—a huddled shapeless heap. So still she lay that for one long moment it almost seemed the vital spark had surely sped—that life itself must be extinct.

That swoon was terribly like death!

CHAPTER II.

"WELL!"

For a moment she manifested no sign of having heard his voice; then she slowly shrugged her supple shoulders, and elevated her delicately marked brows—refolding the while those many closely-written pages lying on her knee; these she deliberately replaced in their large blue envelope, and then—only then—she glanced swiftly up from under her long curled lashes,

and the eyes of these two for the first time met—those of Gaston De Laurnay, full of feverish suspense—those darkly, deeply, mysteriously blue" orbs of Vivien, at once wistful, yearning, tender, defiant, obdurate.

"Well!" again De Laurnay questioned breathlessly, in a still lower tone. He bent his head to read the expression of her face, and stretched forth his hand appealingly (yet albeit it hovered close above he did not venture to rest it on her knee). "Remember—remember only, whilst you keep me thus wantonly in the tortuous agonies of suspense, that your answer involves for me issues scarce less vital than those of life and death!"

Her lashes momentarily quivered, she moistened her ripe under lip.

Ah! surely he could not fail to note how, under the muslin and lace of her summer corsage, her heart beat thick and fast. That heart that was just then stirred by some emotion strange as novel (perilous, bewildering, yet how sweet!) which Vivien might not pause to analyse, for which as yet she found no name.

"He bids me give the matter four-and-twenty-hours reflection, and then to-morrow telegraph my answer—simply—'yes or no!'"

"And which will it be? Oh! Vivien, be merciful! I—my powers of endurance are exhausted. End this intolerable suspense!"

That thin brown head of his had fluttered downwards, and now grasped her warm, white wrist as in a vice.

What words shall describe the hoarse, tremulous eagerness of his tone, the feverish light in his eyes!

Beneath glance and touch Vivien felt her heart leap wildly—an electric shock seemed to thrill through her every vein; she shook in each slender limb, and involuntarily she glanced aside.

Yet she essayed a little laugh—in order to gain time.

"But he must be kept upon the rack in any case another four-and-twenty hours! Poor John, who—"

"Pah!" with an indescribable gesture of withering scorn the Frenchman literally recoiled—releasing the wrist he had thus long held prisoned, and shrinking back from her side—"he suffer—he? What should such an one know of suffering, of anguish, of suspense! the cold-blooded, apathetic Englishman, who could journey forth across the ocean leaving such a wife behind! Monsieur's veins run water—c'est evident—his pulse is stagnant, his languid heart barely throbs. Ah! in the sunny South 'tis otherwise. There men know how to love! Pah! mere human machines at best!—You English, I doubt whether any of you ever really feel!"

"Yet John thinks himself a model husband!" Vivien faltered, still with averted eyes, rapidly folding and unfolding with nervous fingers the thin blue sheets upon her knee. "My father and Josephine both consider I—I won a matrimonial prize far beyond my actual deserts when I became John Staunton's wife!"

"Pah!" De Laurnay laughed with infinite scorn, yet there was a dangerous undercurrent withal in his voice just then, which told at once of tenderest sympathy, and of passionate anguish repressed. "What should they know! An old man and a woman—a woman who herself has lived unsought, unwooded, unwon! How should they estimate the depth or meaning of all that should lurk in that one word—love? A husband who could leave you, madame! Phaugh! Loved with his brain it might be (as too many of your compatriots love), assuredly not with his heart. Real love is unreasoning, irrational, it is born of sense, not of intellect, of passion, not of logic! Believe me, that it is at best but poor weak stuff the chilly sons of Britain offer to their mistresses, in lieu of the genuine nectar we quaff and drain to the very dregs in sunnier, southern climes. Your villainous fog, it seems to me, steals its way into insular breasts, damps even affection, makes passion chill, and love—immortal love himself—but a shivering, cautious, pitiful thing!"

With these last words he rose up suddenly (as though he dare no longer trust himself so near her side), and pushing back the low d coying

branches of the great elm beneath which Vivien sat enthroned—among the shawls and cushions which converted the rustic bench under the tree into a luxurious divan—he emerged upon the smooth-mown, sun-bathed lawn, and began pacing hurriedly to and fro.

Vivien sat motionless, just as he had left her creating her husband's letter this way and that, now folding it oblong, now square—that letter which had come as the arbiter of her life-long fate.

Should she obey its tender behests, or should she briefly cable—"No"?

He had bidden her do as she pleased, and though it "pleased" her not at all to rejoin her husband after eighteen long months of separation almost at a moment's notice—for the friend under whose charge Mr. Staunton proposed Vivien should place herself sailed from Liverpool within ten days—yet but for the accidental presence of Gaston De Lauray at Westlands that sweet June afternoon it is doubtful whether it would ever have occurred to Vivien even to hesitate as to the form her reply should take.

For she had found the year and a half of John's absence long and tedious—more tedious than she could say, until she had fortunately (!) stumbled one day by chance in Piccadilly up against Monsieur Gaston De Lauray—a friend of those happy, still vividly remembered school-days, when Madame De Lauray's hotel in Paris had been at once a haven of refuge and an Elysian retreat for the lonely English girl incarcerated in the dreariest of *pensionnaires* near the forest of Fontainebleau.

Then what more natural than that the Rector should welcome this opportunity of manifesting his gratitude for past favours, and of returning to Madame's son the hospitality so heartily accorded years previously to his own idolized child?

Thus, as a natural sequence, Gaston became a frequent visitor at Westlands—a suburban Arcadia situated on the Surrey side of the river, within an hour's drive of town; and as Gaston had chambers that season at the Alexandra Hotel, in the vicinity of Hyde Park-corner, with the avowed object of endeavouring to kill time and beguile the tedium of existence more successfully this side the Channel than he had of late succeeded in doing (according to his own account) across the water, it is almost superfluous to add that the thoughtless young Frenchman and the discontented grass-widow—still scarcely more than a girl—resumed their former intimacy with a zest which shortly ripened into absolute fervour.

Yet never until this occasion—when the arrival of Staunton's letter and the startling proposal it contained had strangely disconcerted Vivien and thrown Gaston off his guard—had De Lauray suffered himself to be betrayed into word or deed which could justly be regarded even by the most censorious as passing that thin boundary-line hedging off the sunny paths of legitimate flirtation from the arid storm-beaten plains of open impropriety; and however conscious the Frenchman may have been of the passionate longing after forbidden fruit which had sprung up of late in his own heart, it is probable that John Staunton's wife had never hitherto paused to analyse the exact emotions by which she was dominated when Gaston De Lauray hovered dangerously near her side.

It may even be that she herself was startled and dismayed to find at this crucial moment, when she was thus hastily bidden to decide "yes or nay" respecting the most momentous issues of life, that the absolute impossibility of bidding De Lauray an immediate and final farewell rose up before her like a living hydra—more impassable far than the boisterous billows of that broad Atlantic which interposed between her absent lord and this trembling, vacillating wife.

Yet she had been wont awhile since to bemoan John's heartless desertion of his bride in the springtime of her life, and to cherish a bitter sense of grievance in that he seemingly resigned himself all too easily to existence apart from her whom he had left to languish lonely and afar.

What, then, did it portend, this sudden ice-cold dread at her heart that the Rector, that

Josie, that her own sense of duty and rectitude might possibly impel her to accede—no matter at what personal cost—to the terms of John Staunton's letter?

"Vivien, tell me"—it was De Lauray who had pushed aside the bent-bowed branches with a rough and eager hand, and now flung himself heavily down upon the turf close (*How close!*) to the young wife's feet—"how did it happen that so short a time after you were wed, he—this man who has gained legal possession of you—should have left you? Left you here *triste* and lonely in your father's home, whilst he went alone across the sea?"

"I—I would not go!" she answered in a low voice, her eyes bent upon the grass.

"You would not go!—naturally! And so—?"

"I will tell you all about it!" she began, hurriedly—then hesitated, for, in truth, she scarcely knew how to word that tale which rounded but little to her own credit, though still less (so it seemed to her) to that of the absent John. "I suppose I was wrong—they all think so, at least—yet to me it seemed I was right!"

"Right—as always! Small doubt of that! Well, proceed!" In low, passionate accents from the man at her feet, who had momentarily possessed himself of her passive hand, as he gazed up into her averted face.

"Before we were married," Vivien resumed, wrestling her slender fingers from his grasp, yet not daring to meet his eyes, "John had told me he should probably be obliged to go out to South America to superintend some business arrangements about the estates he had inherited. The question was, should the wedding take place at once, or should it be indefinitely postponed until his return? I—I was not very desperately in love," she resumed with a laugh, after a brief pause, "and I told John candidly that if he went away and left me I could not answer for myself; it was not at all impossible that I—I might change my mind in his absence and decline to become Mrs. Staunton on his return. It was the truth, you know—I could not help it! I suppose Nature is answerable for having made me of such weak, vacillating clay!"

"For having invested you, I presume you mean," De Lauray interpolated softly, "with every charm which endears a woman to the passionate heart of man! We do not look for resolution or strength of purpose in the sex which—"

"And so John determined we should be married at once, and—nothing definite was settled, I persist about the American trip; but John declares—and papa and Josie invariably support John, no matter what absurdity he propounds!—that it was understood that if the voyage proved inevitable, I should accompany my husband to Nicaragua in due course. As though I should ever have agreed to such a monstrous notion!" she broke off indignantly, and with a swift appealing glance towards the man whose eyes never even momentarily wandered from her sweet flushed face.

"Why, you know there is no one, literally no one, out there but nasty horrid blacks—uncivilized creatures—for ever at work upon coffee or sugar plantations. I should have been bored to death in a week—and grilled, simply grilled, within a month; and then, too, does it not prove that I am right, and that such a thing was never understood?"

"I had twenty-three elegant dresses in my trousseau, and what on earth could I have done with them at Nicaragua? The notion was barbarous and absurd, I protested; yet they one and all maintained it had been 'fully understood' when we first became engaged."

"*Eh! bien!*" De Lauray questioned, as she paused, something more profound than mere transient eagerness or curiosity in his voice and eyes.

"Well! John persisted, and papa declared that he was right! That he was altogether powerless to remain at home; yet he was considerate enough to say he would not take me out against my will! He maintained, however, to the very end, that I had not been altogether straightforward with him. In short, that he was

the victim of circumstances, and that if he had really understood my determination he would either have given me my release or left our engagement in abeyance until his return, sooner than have married me and ultimately gone out to Nicaragua alone."

"*Parvus diable!*" muttered the Frenchman, under his breath in sympathetic tones—and the sympathy was genuine, although accompanied by a sneer. "In his place I would sooner far have died than have torn myself away for such a cause, from such a bride!"

"Ha! But he is *Saxon* John! Saxon to the backbone, you forget! Well, you can readily understand that we—we had rather a stormy time before we parted; we both conceived ourselves aggrieved—neither of us would confess ourself in the wrong; and I must admit," she added, with one of those strange flashes of candour which constituted so contradictory and subtle a charm in a nature too complex to be termed altogether ingenuous, "that papa and Josie upheld John throughout—as indeed they would do, it seems to me, if he were even proved guilty of manslaughter. And manslaughter, I presume, in this enlightened age, would be held a far greater crime than mere wreck and ruin of—a woman's life!"

"*Pauvre petite!*" Gaston murmured—and the murmur, in such a tone, accompanied by such a glance, was surely tantamount to a caress; "and so he went—*ce cher* John *après!*"

"Yes, he went, and we parted scarcely the best of friends! Three months later John wrote me he could and would return, if I, for my part, would promise to accompany him back to Nicaragua in due course, if his presence on the estates for a time should subsequently prove indispensable. And I declined! *Voilà tout!* Papa and Josie held me little short of criminal; and John remained where he was! Our correspondence has since been of the most strained and formal nature up to the present moment, when—"

"When?" he questioned softly, as she paused again with averted eyes.

"John has melted into a perfect paroxysm of tenderness; beseeches me to avail myself of so exceptional an opportunity of rejoining him; promises to convert daily life into a terrestrial paradise; and, in short, writes to me as a lover, rather than as a husband! Need I say more? Pah! The symptoms of all men labouring under that particular phase of temporary insanity are much the same! I may, therefore, spare myself and you the repetition of details, by simply bidding you to put yourself in his place!" and with a fretful, scornful laugh, Vivien beat a tattoo upon the back of one white jewelled hand, with the envelope she still held listlessly between her fingers.

"Impossible! impossible!" whispered De Lauray, with a sudden passionate quiver in his voice, which vibrated through the young wife's frame, and set her own heart beating strangely. "Do you think if you were mine any power on earth, or Heaven," he supplemented impudently, "would have power to lure or drive me from your side? Answer me, Vivien; you shall, you shall! Such pitiful justice you may at least mete out. Admit that you believe; you know that wild horses would fail to drag me one hair's breadth away if the right, the right divine were mine to lie stretched thus for ever at your feet."

"Ah! but if you were a husband the whole complexion of affairs would wear a different aspect," she answered, lightly, seeking to temporize. "Now—"

"Now I am but a *lover!*" he murmured, hoarsely—"a hopeless, miserable wretch, condemned to languish and fret and fume for the inestimable boon of one precious word or smile; which perchance is denied me after days and weeks of patience, because of a momentary caprice. Ah! *mon Dieu!* mine is, indeed, an accursed fate! Far happier he who voluntarily places the limitless ocean between himself and his wife."

"Ah! you do well to remind me of existent facts. You must go, Monsieur De Lauray, now, at once; and I"—with an attempt to rise—"must take my letter to my father; his advice

and my sister's must decide my immediate course."

"And I, oh! Vivien, how shall I live through the long, interminable hours of this night, until—until I learn the truth! To-morrow before noon expect me. I shall come to learn your decision, and my fate."

"Indeed, you must not. Do you know papa—papa has remarked the frequency of your visits here of late, and, oh! how shall I tell you!" here Vivien clasped her hands in genuine perplexity, whilst her creamy cheek grew momentarily rosy, her eyes bright with a restless, feverish light, "questioned me as to whether I thought you cherished 'intentions' towards Josephine; and I—what could I say!"

"Oh!" muttered De Laurnay, under his breath, "many thanks, *bon papa*, for a brilliant idea. Rely upon my discretion, madame; but, before you go, one word, for pity's sake, one word of hope. Tell me, what shall you answer—yes or no!"

He had flung his arm about her waist, he had drawn her so close to him that his hot breath as it left his lips seemed to scorch her own; and, surely—surely he could not fail to hear the loud pulsations of the heart which fluttered like a frightened bird beneath his hand.

She turned her head, she tried to speak, her cheek was blanched and cold. As her white lips parted, her eyes met his; just, then all too eloquent of the anguish, misery, and passion which convulsed his inmost soul. She sought to droop her lids, she strove to avert his gaze; vainly, vainly! basilisk-wise he seemed to rivet that swift side-glance, even as physically he held her powerless to stir one hair's breadth in his iron grasp.

"Vivien—Vivien! Tell me, shall you answer yes or no!"

"Gaston; let me go! I—"

But the words died unspoken on her lips, crushed by his own; for whilst Vivien struggled to find voice, De Laurnay inclined his dark head but a hair's breadth lower, and pressed one long, fervent, audacious kiss upon that soft, mutinous mouth, which suddenly grew rigid, colourless, and cold as stone.

She struggled like a bird caught in the fowler's net. But when did the helpless feathered thing, once snared, ever succeed in doing aught save bruise its pinions, and ruffle its plumes in futile efforts to escape!

"Tell me, shall you go to him, or shall you stay with me?"

No answer; only her heart beat louder and louder than before. She could not move her parched tongue, she could not raise her eyes.

"Vivien, for Heaven's sake, answer me! Do you go or stay?"

"If I go!" she faltered.

"I go too; or remain but to fling myself before your eyes into those cruel waters which would so soon stretch betwixt us too, even as the vessel leaves the shore."

"If I stay!"

"I swear you shall forget there is aught save joy in this weary world! Vivien, you are silent still. Shall you go or stay?"

Only a breathing space she hesitated.

"I—I cannot go!" she cried. "Oh! Heaven—"

Already she was free. With one smothered ejaculation of triumphant ecstasy he released her—released her and was gone.

And Vivien, gazing blankly down at the blue envelope in her hand, was left to realize with burning blushes, bitterness, and shame, all that had happened within the last half hour; all that the next must decide for her, influencing (as it was bound to do), for weal or woe, the whole life-time yet ahead—not for herself alone, but for more than one other, alas!

Ay, for more human souls than Vivien guessed.

CHAPTER III.

BUT, as Mr. Staunton had dimly foreseen, both her father and sister strongly urged Vivien to accede to so reasonable and tenderly-worded a

request as that which John had addressed to his contumacious wife from across wide intervening seas.

Nevertheless, she cabled to him in the first instance, according to his instructions, a curt but emphatic refusal, and wrote to him subsequently to the same effect, naively explaining that upon consideration of all the circumstances attendant upon their separation she absolutely lacked courage to journey forth to rejoin and link her lot once more with that of one whom, after eighteen long months of absence, she might, perhaps, find it difficult to regard as her husband, and view rather in the light of a friend.

"You may have altered, John—so have I," she wrote in sober earnest, despite the railery of her tone. "We have not been altogether *amis*, if you remember rightly, for long months before we parted; and to confess the truth, I am not brave enough now to cross the seas, to encounter, I scarce know what or whom! You'll have to make love to me all over again, I warn you, when you do return, and if you win me—why, a second honeymoon must follow as a natural sequence and a matter of course. For my part, I can only hope we shall enjoy it better than the first—the last, that is, I mean (which is it!) when I, for one, was considerably bored, and would have given all I was worth if, on those wide, cheerless boulevards at Paris, we could only have met a friend!"

Which was true enough, for even in those halcyon days—when the young bride, if the truth be told, was less actively happy than passively content—Vivien had ever been upon the alert for a chance *rencontre* with her quondam playmate Gaston De Laurnay, with whom she had had no opportunity of renewing her acquaintance since the last "term" of those still recent "school days," whose troubles and trials were already forgotten, whilst their fancied delights were inevitably magnified and multiplied, and invested with that tender, rose-coloured haze which distance invariably casts like a veil athwart the face of vanished joys, and "days departed" to return no more! Ah! cruellest of words.

This letter Josephine—to whom it was in due course submitted by her younger sister—pronounced needlessly heartless, frivolous, and undignified; the occasion was far too serious to warrant indulgence in what Miss Prior did not hesitate to stigmatise as a tone of childish levity, unworthy not alone of Vivien, but likewise insulting to the noble nature of the man whom she addressed, and who was already necessarily labouring, she bade the thoughtless young wife remember, under the effects of a crushing blow and cruellest disappointment.

"Pah!" sneered Vivien, biting the tip of her ivory penholder, as, notwithstanding Josephine's remonstrance, she folded, sealed and addressed the letter which was destined to decide the fates of at least three human lives. "John never loved me, or he would have found it impossible to leave me—still more impossible to resign himself to live apart from me for one whole, long year and a-half. Affection may be capable of such self-denial—love, never! Therein lies all the difference!" she added, with an air of infallibility.

Then Josie—usually gentle and long-suffering to a fault—turned upon her sister with flashing eyes.

"You are utterly unworthy, Vivien, I begin to fear, of the great heart which has been flung down before your feet—to use as a footstool, to spurn like a ball, to play with as you would! You deceived John shamefully before your marriage—you broke your word to him later. You tried his patience before he embarked as surely no man was ever tried before, and you ultimately parted from him with as little show of feeling as one would expect from a woman carved in stone. Your present attitude not only proves that all wifely instincts are dead within your callous breast, but you are unwomanly enough to add the wanton insult of jest to the deliberate injury you do your husband by refusing to respond to his call—a call which should surely thrill your cold heart through and through if you were not insensible as stone!"

Then Vivien slowly turned her queenly head,

and regarded her sister with an expression in her glorious eyes which Josephine remembered for many a day to come.

"It's a thousand pities," she began with a scornful laugh, "that you cannot go out to Nicaragua in my stead to pour the balm of consolation into poor John's aching heart. No one can accuse you, at any rate, of being 'cold' or 'insensible' where he is concerned! You did not part from him, *c'est sûr*, like 'a woman carved in stone.' Heavens! do you remember when I entered—just one breathing space too soon—and found you in his arms? But I bore the trying spectacle manfully—*womanfully*, that is, I mean, of course—though, truth to tell, it was no unexpected revelation! I always suspected—indeed, I *knew* that you loved John from the first!"

Endorsing these sapient words with a quick, emphatic nod, Vivien bent her head once more and began scribbling hieroglyphics upon her blotting paper, as though she had disposed at once and for ever of a matter altogether beneath the dignity of serious discussion.

"Vivien!" Josie hoarsely gasped, her features terribly convulsed, her very lips grown white, "Vivien, you are mad or wicked! Have a care! You scarcely know with whom you have to deal."

"Do I not!" laughed Mrs. Staunton, with a scornful elevation of her perfectly pencilled brows. "That's just where you make a fatal mistake, *très chère*. I have known, moreover, from the very first, but from motives of expediency I thought it wiser to ignore (for *all our sakes*) that my saintly sister was the *inamorata* of my husband. You loved John before ever I became his wife. Spare both yourself and me all denial, Josie. Facts speak only too plainly for themselves; and, for my part, I can but regret that you did not enjoy the empty honour of being led by Mr. Staunton to the altar in lieu of my most unworthy self."

"Vivien, I am no saint!" Josephine retorted in a low voice, which passion rendered well-nigh inaudible, and with an expression upon her face the while which Vivien had never seen there before; "as sooner or later you may discover to your cost, for I am but mortal woman, weak and sinful, though for your sake, and—yes! why should I not confess the truth—for *his*, I have striven, I have struggled, I have prayed for courage to suffer and be strong."

"There was a time when John Staunton was—was dearer far to me than my own life; but when he came to me to tell me that you—*you*, frivolous shallow-pated, all unworthy as you were—had won his great and noble heart, from that moment, Vivien, I strove (as surely woman never strove before) to trample down that sweet pale blossom of love which had sprung up in my breast; and when he asked me—seeing that you loved him not—whether he should persevere in his endeavours to win you, or resign all thought of you for ever, I—albeit my own heart at that time was breaking, Vivien—I bade him hope on, hope ever, and myself sang his praises incessantly in your ears."

"Ten thousand pities that you did not spare yourself so unnecessary an exertion!" Vivien interrupted, with a scornful laugh. "On your head and my father's be all the responsibility of this—this most wretched marriage! You talked, cooed, persuaded me into giving my hand to John Staunton—I say my 'hand'—advisedly, for he never won my heart."

"It may be that in truth I erred through excess of affectionate zeal," Josephine responded sadly—the passionate tremor had already died out of her voice; the fierce light was quenched in her eyes, though her sweet face was paler, sterner than Vivien ever remembered it before.

"For I know how—how weak and pitiful a creature you were at heart, Vivien; influenced by a look, swayed by an admiring word; and I longed, I prayed to see you at safe anchor upon the haven of a true and loyal heart. I held—I still hold—John Staunton as the noblest of his sex. I thought if he won your hand your life-long happiness was ensured, that you must be blessed for evermore, far—far beyond your actual deserts—ay! as mortal woman is seldom blessed

In this weary world, where, Heaven help us! broken hearts and blighted hopes it seems to me prove less the exception than the rule."

She paused; momentarily overcome, perhaps, by the recollections and associations her own torrent of words evoked; paused, covering her eyes with her clasped hands, and slowly rocking herself backwards and forwards in a sudden paroxysm of despairing grief.

Vivien meanwhile gazed spellbound and entranced at the sister whom she had hitherto regarded (from the supreme altitudes of an acknowledged beauty, who had broken hearts in her school days, and had homage laid at her feet almost as soon as she ran alone) with something of contemptuous compassion, as a creature doomed to exist upon the coarse, unpalatable fare of daily life, without the vaguest experience of the *sole sauce piquante* which served to give the dish a pungent flavour, an appetising aroma, according to the tenets the spoiled and flattered fair one held.

Was it possible that Josephine had thus loved! Nay, loved it might be even yet! Vivien herself was fretfully conscious that, despite the boast of many conquests, the undoubted prowess in Cupid's lists which she had shown upon social battle-fields, and that supremacy which had long since tacitly been accorded her, as a woman whose smile was fatal to a rival, whose innocent wiles were pronounced resistless by the sterner sex, the deepest depths of her own heart remained undisturbed, the real Prince Charming who should rouse such love and passionate longing as she yearned to feel had not yet crossed her path.

She ardently longed, moreover, to be awakened from the lethargy in which it seemed to her her senses were wrapped and steeped.

True a dangerous "something" had leapt and thrilled through her every vein, beneath the magic of Gaston's unlicensed kiss; still, still there must be some profounder depths of joy which she longed almost feverishly to fathom, she scarce cared at what cost.

Poor frail, tremulous butterfly! whom too rough a grasp would suffice to bruise and crush, in a single moment, and for ever, out of all similitude to that thing of joy and beauty which Vivien assuredly represented in the flesh—useless, purposeless, as was her life, her being, to others not less than to herself.

And Josephine—sober, saintly Josephine—knew then the meaning of passionate love! had sounded life's deepest depths, it seemed; whilst she, Vivien, had forfeited her liberty, resigned youth's rich inheritance of vague and boundless possibilities, of shadowy rose-coloured hopes, only to—

A dull throb of something akin to envy shot through the young wife's heart, gazing at that unselfish sister who at three-and-twenty was yet unwooed—unwon.

The girl who had ruthlessly trampled her own desires under foot, and shut out from her life the one streak of dawning brightness, which, diverted from its primary object, might perchance have shed its warm rays in full splendour round about herself, in order that another might bask for ever in the radiant sunshine of a loyal heart's undivided love.

She had cast possibilities for herself aside, in order to ensure for Vivien what Josephine herself held the highest prize to which woman might aspire, the fullest cup of earthly bliss from which mortal lips, however blessed, might be privileged to sip.

Ah! how she herself had thirsted, famished! How grateful she would have proved for the merest drippings from that overflowing beaker which had been held on bended knees up to Vivien's scornful lips, only to be thrust aside by her and wantonly trampled under foot!

"Ha! I see it all now!" Mrs. Staunton said aloud, speaking in the low, slow tones of a woman who weighs every word before she gives it voice. "You have been devoted to John's interest from the very first. You admit you did your best to aid him in gaining his heart's desire, regardless of the cost. And now, because he, forsooth, desires a white face by his side, you would drive me forth to banishment, to misery, perhaps to death! You would plead, urge, entreat, insist

that I should leave England, home and friends—everything I care for in the world—not from sisterly regard for my interests, but *all for love of John!* The destinies of nations should be arranged, you seem to think, in accordance with his caprice! A creditable confession, truly! Miserable sinner, erring mortal, as I am, I can scarcely congratulate myself upon the possession of such a saintly sister!"

She threw back her shapely head and burst into a harsh peal of discordant laughter—mocking, scornful, bitter, but strangely lacking the ring of mirth.

It sufficed, however, to startle Josephine back into composure. She withdrew her hands from before her face, she drew herself up to her full height—shivering faintly; then she confronted Vivien calmly, coldly, with a dull defiant spark gleaming in her eyes.

"I wished you to rejoin your husband," she explained icily, "because I held it better so—for you, not less than him. Since the moment that you gave your promise to become John Staunton's wife I take Heaven as my witness I have never harboured one thought of him, save as the husband of my sister—that sister who has proved herself signally unworthy of the name she bears, unworthy to share his life!"

Before Vivien could reply the door was flung wide open and the servant ushered in two visitors—Gaston De Lournay and Sir Archibald Hope, a lively young baronet, whose "place" was situated within a few miles of Westlands, and who had been presented to its inmates by their mutual friend, "the Mounseer"—as it delighted "Archie" to style "a fellow whose only fault consisted in the fact that he was hatched the wrong side of the Channel—deuced hard lines for him, that!"

It was Miss Prior's afternoon "At Home" so it would have been hardly feasible for either of the ladies to have denied themselves to their guests; the intrusion, too, was not altogether *mal à propos*, for it terminated informally a painful scene which neither of the sisters would otherwise have known how to draw to a fitting close.

As it was, however, they strolled out naturally enough through the low, wide open windows conducting on to the velvet lawn; for the afternoon was delicious, and earth was just then sweet and radiant with the odours and the blossoms and the myriad joys of June.

Parker had already spread the five o'clock tea-table under the shady branches of "the young ladies'" favourite elm, and whilst Josephine brewed the fragrant decoction in the Japanese teapot out of the silver urn, De Lournay was deputed to "bruse" "the great" "Queen" strawberries with cream and sugar in sparkling cut-glass ice-plates—the very gleam of which was signally refreshing, and made one feel cool and reinvigorated on such an afternoon.

Meanwhile Vivien strolled to and fro over the newly-mown lawn in the sunshine, with Sir Archibald Hope by her side.

The music of their voices and mingled laughter was wafted by the summer breeze to the ears of those beneath the tree; for Mrs. Staunton was chattering with even more than her wonted volubility, swaying this way and that (like a queenly lily on its slender stem), as she enforced her argument with the faintest possible gesticulation, which lent her words and movements something of airy, foreign grace.

And during the many summer days which followed it was almost ever thus—De Lournay whispering sugared nothings with his most impressive and obsequious air into Miss Prior's ear; whilst Sir Archie hovered by Vivien's side, even though it might be in the direction of Josephine that his swift, sidelong glances winged their way—winged their way, and—lingered.

And Gaston De Lournay was all content, for Mrs. Staunton had kept her promise.

Whilst John languished, heart sick and lonely, on the other side the broad Atlantic, she kept the vow so briefly pledged, responsive to the wily Frenchman's impassioned, whispered,—

"Stay!"

"For a while this much must suffice," he argued; "yet only for a while!"

CHAPTER IV.

"WHERE is your sister, mademoiselle?"

The speaker was De Lournay, who had been unceremoniously ushered into the pretty breakfast-room at Westlands, one bright September morning, where Josephine sat alone, her head bent over her fancy work, a smile of unutterable content upon her lips.

"Vivien has driven into town with my father," she responded, blithely; "but you must remain to luncheon and await their return. There is joyous anticipation in the very air, monsieur. Surely you perceive its delicate aroma? But I shall leave Vivien to impart the glad tidings herself."

Josephine spoke unreservedly, and with a bright smile upon her lips.

Gaston had played his part so well during the summer weeks just sped that Miss Prior (and all onlookers at the game) had not unnaturally concluded she herself was the attraction which lured the Frenchman all too often to the Rectory.

It would be too much to say perhaps that she reciprocated this supposed attachment, but she had, at any rate, brought herself to receive in a kindly spirit his ostentatiously open attentions; for she had told herself that an alliance with a man of assured position, ample means, and no few personal advantages, could scarcely fail to be productive of happiness and content.

Josephine knew herself to be in possession of a well-organised mind and temperament, and having once passed through the fiery ordeal of passion and stamped out every lingering latent spark nought remained for her, she argued, but to accept the offer of some honourable, true-hearted man, and trust that, once she had given the promise to become the wife of such an one, her heart would incline like a young twig bent in the right direction.

Gaston was a favourite both with the Rector and her sister—all sufficient reasons, surely, why Josephine should have responded graciously hitherto to his overtures to win her favour, his ostentatious endeavour to please; but to-day there was a far less impersonal cause for the warmth of welcome she accorded him.

If so be that the gallant Frenchman, finding time and opportunity propitious, should choose this occasion to plead his cause and press his suit, why, Josephine reflected, with a nervous throbbing at her heart, she would incline a willing ear to his tale of love, and plight her troth, and place her hand, well pleased and fearlessly, in his; rejoicing, too, that it had happened thus, for reasons too complex to be stated.

"Why keep me in suspense until your sister's return?" De Lournay questioned with an impatient laugh, as he flung his gloves into his hat, and subsided into a low chair opposite the girl. "The glad tidings" will not be less welcome from your lips than hers; and if—as I presume—they concern one or both of you, they can hardly fail to be of interest to me!"

"I believe that!" Josephine, responded, heartily, dropping her work and clasping her hands ecstatically in the fulness of her joy. "Well, Vivien had letters from Nicaragua this morning; and John—my brother-in-law—hopes to be with us, at latest, in a few days. He would start—"

"*Mon Dieu!*" escaped De Lournay's ashen lips, and, all involuntarily—nay, unconsciously it seemed—he sprang, trembling, to his feet.

"Monsieur De Lournay! Gaston—"

"Is—in this thing true? Do not jest with me, Josephine, do not attempt to temporise! Is it true, that—that he is homeward bound?"

"Quite true! And, pardon my observing that I am at a loss to conceive how—"

"*Ciel!*" he interrupted hoarsely, passing his hand across his livid brow like a man awaking from some hideous dream, "it—it cannot be! Impossible! And—and where is Vivien now?"

"I have already informed you," Josephine retorted, coldly, "that Mrs. Staunton has gone up to town with her father, and—"

"Ah! you will think me mad, no doubt! And so I am! But—indeed, I cannot stay one moment longer! Pardon me, and—adieu!"

And, suiting the action to the word, Gaston

snatched up his hat and escaped from the room before Josephine had recovered from her amaze, or regained sufficient self-possession even to attempt to detain him.

She remained speechless, spell-bound, and immovable, just as he had left her, too dazed and stunned even to reflect—like a woman paralysed or petrified, whilst the moments crept away.

Thus Vivien found her a full hour later, when she entered, hat in hand. Then, glancing up for the first time, Josephine noted how blanched and haggard, weary, worn, and wan was her sister's usually lovely, radiant face.

"Gaston has been here, Parker tells me," she began at once, turning towards Josephine, and flinging her cloak aside, "asking for me! Did you tell him—tell him that—!"

"Yes—I told him, Vivien."

"And—what on earth did he say!"

She scarce made an effort, so it seemed, to repress the breathless eagerness of her tone, as white-lipped, wide-eyed, she gazed feverishly at her sister, as though in her impatience she could almost tear from her throat the answer which Josephine hesitated how to frame.

"He said— Oh! Vivien, what does it mean!" she cried at length in frenzied tones, clasping her hands despairingly, and returning Vivien's gaze with sudden, voiceless anguish frozen in her eyes. "He said— Oh! surely I have been dreaming! It cannot, cannot be! It was some hideous nightmare, from which I shall presently awaken—awake in time to see you safely clasped in the haven of your husband's arms. Oh! Vivien, why do you stare like that! Why—why no single reassuring word! Tell me that—that I have been dreaming! that it is not—was not true!"

"I know not of what you are raving!" Vivien returned, with impatient scorn, as she started up from the couch on which she had flung herself with a weary sigh, and began pacing restlessly, like a caged but tameless creature, to and fro—alternately pushing the furniture out of her path with no gentle hand, then interlacing her white fingers despairingly in a hopeless, ineffectual effort to school and restrain herself. "I—I only know that John is homeward bound; and, oh! Heaven! I would sooner jump into a yawning grave than be condemned to sit still here awaiting his return."

"Vivien! you are mad!"

"Ah! yes; and bad as well, no doubt, according to your saintly creed! I am but a poor dissembler at the best, and now—now I no longer care even to attempt to deceive you, others, or myself! I loathe the thought of John's return! I—I would sooner die, it seems to me, than resume my lifelong duties as—his wife!"

"Vivien!" Josephine fairly wailed, and into that one word seemed compressed all the anguish, horror and reproach to which the human voice could give utterance—all that language could express.

"Ah! it is true!" cried Vivien, flinging her shapely arms aloft, then clasping her hands behind her head. "I—moreover I dare not meet him! Oh! Heaven be merciful—what shall I—can I do!"

"Dare not meet him! What do you mean! Oh! Vivien, for Heaven's sake, calm yourself, be rational, unlay those terrible words! Surely you have not reflected what they mean!"

"Does one reflect when one is half distraught! Weigh words when one is mad!" Vivien echoed, wildly. "No words in the English tongue, it seems to me, could justly convey what I mean—what I feel—or the thing I shall soon be! For I—I must make good my escape, Josie. Ah! it is useless staying at me like that! I know not, care not how, when, or where, only I—I must, I will hide myself in the furthestmost corner of the earth, rather than await John's return—rather than meet his eyes!"

"But why! Wherefore! Explain! explain! Surely he has not reproached you—threatened you! He knows no cause for dissatisfaction."

"Worse than that! He overwhelms me with protestations of undying affection—a man who could leave me for almost two years! He says my letter of refusal to join him was so naive, so

candid, so pathetic. He understood so well what I meant; he appreciated so entirely my—my ingenuousness, that although he dared not say one word to me until he had succeeded in effecting arrangements, yet from the moment my letter reached him he made up his mind to rejoin me in England at any cost. And—oh! endless twaddle to the same effect! Fancy, having to bear being 'made love to' over again, by a husband who had deserted one for half a lifetime, and who will be two years older, uglier, more staid then when he said good-bye! He will speak like a Yankee, and dress like a boor. Oh! heavens, what shall I—can I do!"

"This is mere childishness, Vivien!" returned Josephine, coldly, momentarily reassured; for, after all, as she hastily reflected, the situation scarcely rose to the dignity of tragedy, if her sister's mind could descend to the consideration of such trivialities as these. "Where is papa! You have not pained him, I trust, by a word of all this!"

"Papa! papa! Oh! I left him at Esher. As we were driving home we met Mr. Gascoigne, who wanted papa to inspect a newly-purchased mare, and—"

"Well, Vivien!" sternly, for Miss Prior perceived her sister's thoughts had already wandered off from the subject under discussion.

"Eh! Oh! Gascoigne offered him a mount, and they arranged to ride down to Westlands together; at least, I think so. I don't remember clearly, only—papa, I know, said he would be home before I could arrive with the carriage. Something about lunch, too; but really I forget," and Vivien raised her hand to her head with a gesture of weariness and bewilderment infinitely pathetic.

At that very moment Parker entered with a scared and terrified expression upon her homely features.

The groom from Sunnyside had ridden across the green in hot haste to say, "Would Miss Prior please to go at once, as the Rector had been taken ill!"

"Ill!" Josephine echoed, blankly, momentarily stupefied; then as a sudden inspiration flashed across her, "Thrown!" she cried, wildly, "thrown, no doubt! You said, Vivien, did you not, that Gascoigne had offered papa a mount!"

But without waiting for her sister's rejoinder Josephine caught up an old hat which chanced to lay on a jardinière with her gardening scissors and basket, and pushing past Parker with scant ceremony flew out of the room, down the hall, and was across the garden and making for the green almost before the bewildered handmaiden had recovered her breath.

"You, Gaston!—you!"

"Yes, Vivien! It is myself! Did you conceive it possible I should remain long absent when—when I had seen your sister and heard the truth! Did she not tell you I had been!"

"Yes, she told me. Oh! pity me! Gaston, you see before you the most miserable woman upon earth!"

"Ah! Vivien, *mignon!* say those words again. They whisper of joy and hope to me, despite the tears in your radiant eyes—the anguish of your tone!"

Mrs. Staunton had sprung hastily to her feet as De Laurnay bounded in from the garden, unannounced, through the open window; and this breathless dialogue had been carried on between them whilst they stood facing one another, close together, yet far apart, for the Frenchman had not even dared advance his hand to grasp the girl's in conventional greeting; whilst Vivien, conscious stricken and amazed, had all involuntarily recoiled, scarce venturing even to meet his eyes, albeit she stood spellbound, motionless, as though rooted to the spot.

But as his last words died away in a whisper, Gaston flung one arm about her, and bent his head close to her ear; though even then he did not dare draw her to a close embrace, or fold her heart to his heart.

She started from his side aghast. She had long known his secret, as he no doubt guessed hers.

Yet since that ever memorable June morning

when beneath the trees she had incautiously discussed with him the expediency of acceding to or refusing her absent lord's request, no word had passed between them of an absolutely criminal nature—their guilty love had been tacitly understood, never openly confessed!

Yet what indeed remained to be said after Gaston De Laurnay had dared to press unlicensed kisses—unreproved—upon Vivien's glowing lips!

Of what avail subsequent protest or rebuke, explanation or expostulation, once carresses (which were profanation) had been tendered by the lawless Frenchman and passively accepted by John Staunton's erring wife!

After that little indeed remained which words were needed to express.

Vivien had long, and too fully, realised Gaston's passionate, misplaced love for herself; whilst, for her own part, up to the present moment she had scarcely known what term to apply to that baneful, unwholesome sentiment which had sprung up like some rank, noisome weed within her own restless, dissatisfied heart.

Yet both alike had been careful to eschew word or look, or deed, which might serve to remind the other of that unwise, unpardonable episode which one at least of the guilty twain strove vainly to forget; yet as the summer days stole all too fleetly by, and the roses faded, and midsummer joys declined only to give place to September glories, Vivien realised that for her daily life had lost that terrible *ennui* by which she had erewhile been consumed; whilst for Gaston De Laurnay existence was once more endowed with that *piquant* flavour apart from which he, like many another of his compatriots, voted "life unendurable."

Until now, however, no word had passed the lips of either (since that crucial moment when Vivien had been so suddenly called upon to decide a question involving, as it seemed to her, her whole lifelong fate) directly criminalising either one or the other of the pair, who yet each secretly acknowledged him or herself deeply erring, and held the other scarce less guilty on the same count.

But in an emergency so startling and so unexpected as the present, prudence, reticence, and subterfuge were flung broadcast to the winds, each faced the naked truth at this perilous moment.

Vivien realising that she lacked strength and courage to meet the husband she had tacitly deceived—De Laurnay aghast to find that for him life would be a dreary void, a mere purposeless routine, once that mythical John Staunton—who thus far had but vaguely disturbed his peace—should become a tangible reality in lieu of a shadowy rival, and take his legitimate place in the flesh, by the side of Vivien—his wife!

Yet even so, Vivien scarcely knew what she feared to lose—whilst Gaston trembled to put into words all that he longed to gain!

"Your words whisper of hope to me!" he said, and then stood silent gazing at her; for Vivien had fled from his encircling arm and stood cowering opposite, like a guilty creature, in an angle of the wall—her face covered by both her hands, shame, despair, humiliation, like so many demons, contending for the mastery within her breast.

A quick "rat-tat" upon the rectory knocker startled them both back into momentary composure; and only just in time, for Parker entered but a second later, bearing a telegram upon a silver salver, which she handed to Mrs. Staunton, murmuring briefly,—

"For you, ma'am."

At the sight of the orange-coloured envelope an ice-cold hand seemed to close about the heart of that conscience-stricken wife.

She dropped into the nearest chair before she tore it open; one hurried glance, and then the thin pink paper fluttered from her nerveless fingers, whilst her white lips parted with a moan.

"Oh, Heaven!" she wailed, "have mercy! help me! Courage fails me! I—I am utterly undone!"

"Vivien! speak to me!" Gaston implored, in low, hoarse tones, which passion rendered well-nigh inaudible even to his own ear; and as he spoke, half-unconsciously, perhaps, he dropped

on one knee beside her, and passed his arm about that trembling form, bringing his face on a level with her own.

The wretched, misguided girl felt almost grateful for that momentary support—De Lournay's arm appeared strong and helpful, and a momentary yearning was upon her to lay her weary, aching head down upon the haven of his breast, which seemed at least to promise rest, security and peace; unutterably precious pledges these to the poor stumbling, floundering soul, tempest-tossed and passion-rocked.

"What does it say? It is from—"

"Yes! He telegraphs from Liverpool he may be here at any moment. Heaven only knows how soon! He has deceived me!" she cried, wildly, starting to her feet. "No matter what his motive, he is as culpable as I! He had sailed before his letter left—he entrusted it to a friend to post when the *Orion* was safely under way to 'surprise' us, as he says! And he—I—Ah! what's the use of talking! Words avail but little now!"

She clasped her hands in a transport of frenzy; she paced to and fro like a creature possessed. One moment she raised appealing eyes to heaven, the next she fixed them—all involuntarily—in mute entreaty upon De Lournay's blanched and terribly contorted face.

"*Mon Dieu!*" escaped his livid lips, and then he stood for one long moment paralysed—glaring speechless and immovable at the woman whom he loved.

"Vivien! what shall you do? Stay here to meet him, or—"

"I dare not!" she interrupted wildly. "You don't know John—so stern, so rigid—and, oh, to have to endure protestations, caresses, and honeyed words from lips one has ceased to love! Ah, if I, indeed, am guilty—as I can no longer doubt—well, an all-sufficient punishment has already overtaken me. Here on earth I shall have expiated, and I can but humbly hope and pray I may be held scatheless, blameless up above; for when I lay the life-long burden down at last surely I shall have atoned! Oh, how gladly would I resign life itself rather than meet John Staunton's eyes!"

"That is not the sole alternative, Vivien! There is a way—oh, how easy!—of avoiding all you fear! Vivien, Vivien! you need no empty words to tell you how dear—how unutterably dear you are to me! Fly with me, dearest—now, this moment—and I swear that life henceforth shall be for you but one long rose-coloured dream! Paris, Italy—where you will—we will build our bower of bliss. Earth will be Paradise—existence uninterrupted joy, if we share it together, thus—thus!"

He had wound his arms about her, he had drawn her to his breast; her heart was fluttering against his own as he caressed her hair, her eyes, her lips.

Vivien moaned like a thing in pain, yet she made no effort to release herself from the heaven of that embrace. Storm-beaten, rudderless as a frail barque tossing on a raging sea, she was grateful at that perilous moment to find any rock to lean against, albeit against that self-same treacherous rock, soon or late, her life's barque must surely drift to wreck!

"Come with me, darling—now, this moment! Gaston continued, in a frenzied whisper, drawing her closer to his heart. "My phæton stands without in the road, and not a second need be lost! In truth, the danger even now may be nearer than we think! Listen to me, Vivien: there lie your hat and cloak. Throw them on, jump into the trap, and drive quickly up to town. I will take the train to Victoria, and go straight to the Alexandra Hotel. I shall get in long before you, and shall have effected all arrangements for—your comfort long before you arrive. We'll catch the tidal train, *mignon*, and cross to Calais to-night. Then—then let John Staunton, or any other, catch us if they can!"

"Oh, no—no wrong, so wrong!" she wailed incoherently, yet clinging in her despair but the more tightly to his breast. "Oh, Gaston, Gaston, you know not what you ask! I—I should be ruined—ruined—wrecked for life, and—"

"And if you stay—what then, Vivien! Bound to a log, a thing of stone, for ever! Which fate is preferable! Life and love with me, or existence as John Staunton's wife! How will you meet him! What shall you say when he holds you thus, and presses kisses thus, thus on your trembling lips! Will you think, *mignon*, of—"

"Ah! I cannot bear it! I dare not risk it!" she cried, shuddering uncontrollably. "Gaston, save me, save me from such a fate! I am yours, to do with what you will if—only you can rescue me from a life ten thousand times worse than death!"

How he answered her matters little. In another moment both were gone!

CHAPTER V.

"I HARDLY know the full extent of the danger; but his injuries are serious, I fear. Dr. Phillips declines to pronounce judgment definitely, so I have telegraphed to London for further advice. Sit down, Sir Archie, and"—Josephine laid her hand upon the bell as she spoke—"oh! I shall not hesitate to avail myself of your services, I assure you," she continued, cutting short the young baronet's fervent offers of assistance. "If I find you can be of use. Parker"—as the servant entered with a note upon a tray—"where is Mrs. Staunton! Tell her I've returned, and—Well! girl, what's the matter now!" she questioned, sharply, noting that Parker looked white and scared, and stared at her young mistress as though she had seen a ghost.

"Oh! please, miss, Mrs. Staunton, this 'ere note's from her, miss; she bid me give it you at once, and—"

"A note from Vivien!" Josephine snatched it with a trembling hand. "Has she gone out then! And—"

"Please, miss, she—Mrs. Staunton 'ave drove away in Mounseer's carriage! I—I see'd her go myself."

"Gracious heavens! Ha!" with a desperate effort, recovering self-possession; "yes, of course, I—I remember now. That will do, Parker; you—you may go. Did you understand, girl! At once!"

But, even as the door closed, and she broke the seal of the envelope, poor Josephine's self-control deserted her, and she sank down upon the nearest chair, moaning, gasping, like a creature wounded unto death.

"For Heaven's sake, Miss Prior!" cried Sir Archie, springing to her side, "what's the matter! What does all this mean? May I—shall I read the note!"

Josephine faintly nodded assent. She was for the moment completely crushed and stunned by the extent of the calamities which seemed to have overtaken her thick and fast as hailstones upon a winter's night.

The envelope contained John's telegram and a few hasty lines of explanation, scrawled in pencil by Vivien's trembling hand,—

"I dare not stay to face John, and so I go. For pity's sake do not pursue me; it would be useless. And, believe me, 'twill be happier for all that he and I should never meet again!"

"She is mad!" cried Josephine, in low, frenzied tones, starting to her feet; "we must overtake her without an instant's delay, and endeavour to bring her back to her senses before it is too late! Oh! Sir Archie, you perhaps can help me; this is, in any case, no moment for concealment. Moreover, on your friendship and discretion I feel I may rely. It is with Gaston De Lournay my sister has fled. Oh! counsel me what steps to take, before—before John returns to find his home desolate!"

"De Lournay—never!" cried Sir Archibald, paling somewhat beneath his mask of summer tan. "I—I saw him at the station as I came through. He was just jumping into the train for Victoria; and, thank Heaven! I can swear he was alone!"

"Ha!" One moment Josephine drew breath more freely, only to shudder uncontrollably, however, the next. "False hopes! false hopes!"

she cried, mournfully; "it is part of their plan. They could scarcely be so shameless as to leave Westlands together; to every tramp they passed along the road their names and faces would be familiar. They have both made for town, you see, but by different routes. For Heaven's sake, Sir Archie, suggest something, anything, what plan you will, so only that we can arrest them before they cross to-night. For, without doubt, that is Gaston's plan; he will take her straight to Paris, and—"

"Humph! probably enough! Well, all I can say, my dear Miss Prior, is, that everything that mortal man can do, rely upon it, shall be done! There is no time to waste now in reflection. One step is obvious—I must make for Victoria myself at once, and en route I shall have ample leisure to mature my plans. I'm off forthwith, without a second's delay! And directly I gain news of them I'll wire, you may be sure! I'll catch up Gaston, never fear; they won't start before the tidal train, and—and,—well! I'll get hold of a clue somehow, and put a stop to his dastardly villainous game!"

"Ah! I know you will do all that's possible," Josephine cried, in grateful tones, extending both her trembling hands, which were warmly clasped by the excited baronet. "I need scarcely remind you of all that hangs in the balance; more than life or death is involved for her! Her whom we one and all hold so—so unutterably dear!"

"All that human efforts may accomplish shall be effected, my dear Miss Prior, rest assured! To serve you, I—believe me, I would journey barefoot to the Land's End!"

There was something in his voice and eyes just then, as he held her hands and gazed into her face, which startled Josephine, even at that fateful moment; for, truth to tell, she had always regarded Sir Archie as one of the most respectful, but most hopelessly infatuated victims of her sister's fascinations. Why else had he haunted Westlands so persistently during the summer months just sped! Why—ah! could it be! no, never.

Yet this was no moment to indulge in abstract speculations, only—only her face grew flushed and warm, her heart beat thick and fast; one word of thanks she whispered breathlessly, then Sir Archibald wrung her hands in leave-taking, and vanished like a lightning flash.

But even then Josephine dared not pause to reflect upon the complex and bewildering elements of the "situation." She rang at once for Parker, and with the utmost self-possession (unmindful of the necessity of lulling any suspicious which her own discomposure upon receipt of Vivien's note, coupled with the fact of Mrs. Staunton's flight, had without doubt awakened) gave directions as to the preparation of the Rector's room, for the immediate reception of the sufferer; for Mr. Prior, though badly injured, insisted on being removed from Sunnyside (opposite whose hospitable portals he had been thrown by his friend's mare, as Josephine had surmised) as soon as arrangements could be effected for his transfer, with due regard to prudence.

"And Mrs. Staunton, Miss!" Parker questioned, determined to improve the occasion—"if she comes back whilst you are out, shall I—will she—"

"Eh! oh! Mrs. Staunton's return is—quite uncertain. There has been a telegram, by the way, to say Mr. Staunton may arrive to-day—indeed, at any moment; and—and my sister has driven off to—meet him; though it is very possible she will miss him upon the road. So—what are you staring at, Parker! I look ill!—no doubt! This has been a terribly trying day—the Rector's accident, and—and the weather. There! you may go now! I—I have nothing more to say!" and as the girl—mystified, curious, and only partially enlightened—reluctantly withdrew, Josephine flung herself with a groan upon the couch, pushing her hair back from her brow, like a woman half distraught.

And no wonder! Surely in all the life ahead she never might forget the tragic incidents which had crowded into this one day, as thickly as

though the flying minutes had been slowly passing years.

She stooped to pick up John Staunton's telegram, which had fluttered to the ground; then she opened and perused once more Vivien's hasty, pencilled scrawl.

As she bent over it (her throbbing head, with a still more aching heart) the parlour door was again flung wide open; and before she could realize what had happened, John himself bounded forward and clasped her eagerly in his arms.

"Josephine!"

"John!"

"And Vivien absent? The girl tells me she has gone to meet me—impossible! I should have seen her at the station, or passed her on the road. Jessie! for Heaven's sake what does your scared face mean? Why are your lips white?—your limbs trembling!—why?"

"Papa—there has been an accident you know—did they not tell you?" Josephine faltered incoherently; gazing with terrified eyes up into John's sunburnt face.

But prevarication or evasion were alike foreign to her candid nature; her lips quivered painfully, a giddy flush stole momentarily to her athen cheeks.

It was impossible to mistake her obvious embarrassment and terror, though, even while she spoke, she made a clumsy effort to crush the tell-tale telegram and the letter she still held into the pocket of her dress.

"Josephine!" John cried, bewildered and alarmed. "You—you are concealing something from me!—tell me the truth at once. Let me know the worst—I can bear it better than this intolerable agony of suspense! Where, in Heaven's name, where has Vivien gone?"

"Oh! John!" she wailed; "John—"

But his eye had lighted upon the pencilled paper; he snatched it ruthlessly from her hand.

"Gone!—gone! Great Heavens! Josephine—it cannot, cannot be! Gone—fled!—away from me! With whom, then?—name him, that I may wring his neck! Speak, or by Heaven I—I shall shake the words out of your throat!"

Unconsciously, in his frenzy he suited the action to the word. He had seized her ungently by the arm; he held her as in a vice; his face was livid, his eyes ablaze. Glancing up one moment Josephine shivered, cowering and covering her face with her hands like a guilty, conscience-stricken thing.

(Continued on page 68.)

AN UNLUCKY SMILE.

—101—

THERE were angry bitter thoughts in Mabel Colchester's heart as she sat alone in the splendid solitude of her boudoir.

Her dark face, exquisitely beautiful in its perfection of outline, and in its scarlet tints of lip and cheek, bore in the hunk eyes and tear-stained cheeks the unmistakable signs of recent weeping. The haughty curve of the lips and the clinching of the delicate, jewelled hands, betokened that the grief had been accompanied by anger, while the nervous and constant tapping of one of the little satin-slipped feet made it evident that Miss Colchester was neither meek, mild, nor patient.

Some one rapped at the door—her maid, no doubt.

"Go away," she said, impatiently, "go away, Hortense! Did I not tell you that I wished to be alone this morning?"

"It isn't Hortense," said the person outside, "it's Ben."

The words were simple and commonplace, but the rich grandeur of the voice made them sound like a short, sweet strain of music.

A bright smile broke over Mabel's troubled face; she opened the door instantly.

"Dear old Ben, how glad I am to see you! Where have you been keeping yourself all this week?" she almost breathlessly asked.

"At home," he replied.

"Have you been ill?" and a pair of lovely, anxious eyes, looked up into Ben Morford's face, sending a thrill of subtle joy through his veins.

"No," he said, seating himself beside her. "I have not been ill, but chose to play reclus for a few days. And now let me question you. There are tear stains on your cheeks—what has vexed you this morning?"

"It is nothing—indeed it is nothing," said Mabel, hastily. "You know how foolish I am, Ben; a mere trifle will make me shed tears."

He saw that his question had pained and embarrassed her, and therefore he did not press it further.

After a few minutes of desultory conversation she relapsed into the unpleasant reverie which his coming had disturbed.

Before any other guest she would have striven to maintain her accustomed gaiety of spirits, but in the presence of Ben Morford—her "dearest, truest, and best friend," as she was wont to style him—she felt no restraint, and no necessity for deception.

And he, the dearest, truest, and best friend, sat looking at her with a shadow of pain coming across his splendid, passionate eyes—eyes which, of late, could scarcely keep the secret of the love which had grown with his growth and strengthened with his strength, until it had become the first thought of his heart, and the brightest, purest hope of his life.

That Mabel Colchester, a girl of quick, keen perceptions, should have remained unconscious of this love seems almost impossible, yet so it was.

Had you suggested such a thing to her she would have laughed amusedly, and told you that Ben had rocked her in her cradle; that he had teased and petted her during her whole life; that he had loved her just as he loved his sister Bertha; that he was a dear, noble fellow, but that he had never dreamed of loving her in a romantic fashion; and that you must never hint such a thing again, or else she should be quite angry with you; and so ever afterward you held your peace, and poor Ben went on loving, and Mabel went on liking, until at last the year and day and hour came in which the man spoke of his lifelong love, and the girl's heart was undeceived.

And the year and day and hour was that in which Mabel sat thinking, with passionate anger and pain of her love—the keen, crafty, handsome man—of the last night's *bal masque*, in which her heart had been so terribly wounded by his indifference and neglect—of the fair, fair woman who had leaned upon his arm and looked up into his face with love-lit eyes—of her own fierce though smothered jealousy and rage.

Morford's voice broke in upon her gloomy reverie:

"You are in a sombre mood this morning, Mabel!"

There was a quiver of pain in the voice, which she could not fail to detect.

"Dear Ben," she said, penitently, "I am in a sombre mood, or, rather, a very unhappy one. Forgive me for having appeared sullen and disagreeable, but I cannot help it; you would not blame me if you knew how wretched, how unhappy, I am!"

He would not ask her again what it was that vexed or troubled her, but with an irresistible impulse of passionate tenderness he passed his arm around her, and drew her closely to his side.

It was the first act of love, and Mabel was so startled and bewildered by it that she had not power to speak or move.

His face was dangerously near hers, and swift and silent his first kiss fell upon her lips.

Then she freed herself from his encircling arms, and looked at him sorrowfully, amazedly, saying very gently, while the blushes flamed upon her cheek:

"I think you forget yourself, Ben, I never knew you to act in this way before."

"I love you!" he said in a husky, impassioned tone. "Let that plead my excuse."

Mabel's heart was stirred to its profoundest depths of pity and tenderness.

The knowledge of his passion, suddenly as it

had come to her, had brought with it no loathing, no repugnance, but a vague, dreamy sense of sorrow, and a pity almost akin to love.

Something within her heart seemed to say to her this—this is your true lover—the noble, genial, gentle-souled man so well suited to take your wayward life into his own, and make it serenely, perfectly happy. Turn away while there is yet time from that other love which you have madly hoped to claim, for this is the stronger, the purer, the tenderer of the two.

But across these inward promptings drifted the vision of a dark face, a manly, splendid face, lit with dark, magnetic eyes, and crowned with a halo of sunny hair, a face so wondrously, so gloriously beautiful that once seen it could never be forgotten. Even in imaginary vision its beauty held Mabel spell-bound.

She had no word of hope for poor Ben; she could only look at him in painful silence, while the grandly formed head and bright, vivid face of his rival seemed still to float before her tearful eyes.

Again Morford spoke, and his voice was full of the anguish of doubt.

"Don't look at me so sorrowfully, Mabel. I ask not for pity, but for love, and if you cannot give it to me, say so at once, and I will go away and never again intrude myself upon you."

"Ben, dear Ben," she said, falteringly, "I do love you, but not with the love for which you ask. You cannot think how it surprises and pains me to hear that you care for me other than as a friend."

"Surprise and pain! These, then, are the return for the love of a lifetime!"

The love of a lifetime! The words thrilled her with solemn awe, and again the inward voice seemed to plead for the stronger, purer and tenderer love, but she steeled her heart against it as she thought of him who, in a few short weeks, she had learned to love with all the fervour and intensity of her nature.

"We have known each other from childhood, we have always been like brother and sister, and oh! Ben, it does make me wonder and grieve to think that you should now—"

"Hush!" he said hoarsely. "I do not care to hear about wonder or grief. I ask you for your love, you refuse it to me, it is enough. See how calmly I can part with you," and with a harsh, ironical laugh he held out his hand, which was quivering like that of one suddenly pained.

Her warm, white fingers closed around it.

"It is hard for me to give you pain. I shall never know a friendship dearer or sweeter than yours has been to me, and for your love—I shall live to see it given to one more worthy than myself."

He did not respond to her words. The white silence of anguish rested upon his face as he lifted her hand to his lips, and went out from her bright, beautiful presence, leaving with her the sunshine of his life, and taking with him the brooding shadow of an unrequited love.

Two hours later Mabel still sat alone in her boudoir. Her face was very, very sorrowful, for it seemed to her as if she should never again behold the face of her rejected lover, and the thought was so exquisitely painful to her that her heart began to throb with a strange doubt, seeming to ask itself—is it true that I really love the other, may I not have mistaken a fleeting passion for that diviner feeling so much calmer, yet so much more beautiful and true?

"Garth Clarendon."

Again her reverie had been broken, and this time by a servant bearing a card with the above name traced thereon in firm, clear characters.

"I will see him presently," she said, and the servant left the room.

There was now no question in her heart in regard to her relative feeling toward her two lovers. Every fibre in her body responded to the magic of that pencilled name. Fancy or love, it was all the same to her, Garth Clarendon was the man to marry.

She went down to meet him, striving hard to keep up the semblance of the outward frigidity which had disguised her jealousy of the night previous, striving hard to remember that, with

the exception of the last three hours, she had spent the day in nursing her anger against him, feeding its flame with the recollection of the tender glances she had seen him bestowing upon another.

In vain! Mabel, strong and proud in all things else, was very weak in her love for this man.

The first clasp of his hand brought back the wild, sweet idolatry which it was his triumph to read in her great flashing eyes.

"You are not well this morning, Mabel!"

Ah! the subtle tenderness of the words, it thrilled her whole being with a rapturous joy.

"I am quite well, Mr. Clarendon."

How calmly she tried to speak; but Garth Clarendon smiled as her eyes drooped shyly beneath his.

He knelt beside her playfully.

"We were not friends last night, were we?"

"It was your fault, and not mine."

"My bright Queen Mab, I only wanted to see if you cared for me sufficiently to be jealous of my attentions to *la belle blonde*. Your insouciance stung me to the quick; was it real or assumed?—tell me!"

"It was real."

Pride prompted her to speak the untruth. Of course Clarendon did not believe her. He determined that she should confess the truth; he was very proud of his power over this beautiful woman.

"I will ask you again, Mabel, and this time you will tell me what will make me very happy—that the indifference was assumed."

He laid his hand lightly upon hers, and she quivered beneath the electric touch.

A subtle, dreamy splendour came into his eyes as he looked up at her beseechingly.

"Tell me the truth, Mabel; you were angry at my apparent neglect of you last night. Is it not so?"

"Yes!"

And the tears would come as she remembered the long night of martyrdom—for what was it but martyrdom for a woman to behold the man she loves paying homage to another?

Clarendon arose to his feet, and drawing a chair near Mabel sat down upon it with the air of a man who is about to say something of importance.

The time had come when he felt that he must speak the all important "I love you," and it was with the serene satisfaction that he contemplated the fact that the utterance of those three words with the accompanying question, "Will you become my wife?" would secure to him the joint proprietorship of a fortune of twenty or thirty thousand pounds, which Mabel already held.

Nature had given Garth Clarendon a face and form that a prince might have envied, but his mind had nought to distinguish it, save a certain craftiness and a genius for plotting which had served him well.

He was a scientific love-maker. Mabel Colchester was a beauty and an heiress; the last word claimed his regard in a worldly point of view—the first touched his heart through the senses, the only manner in which it was possible to reach that organ.

He would never have asked her to be his wife did he not remember constantly that he counted his pounds by tens, while she counted hers by thousands.

He was a fortune hunter—a hard epithet to be applied to such a noble-looking fellow, but nevertheless a true one.

In Mabel he had found his prize, but had not gained it.

He sat beside her like a young Apollo pleading his suit, and never was the old, old story told with sweeter eloquence.

But, alas! just as the question had been asked which required the "yes" which so many women have spoken, and so many men joyed to hear, Mabel raised her drooping eyes to her lover's face!

What did she see there to cause her to start back with white face and wrathful, glittering eyes?

A smile, and such a smile as few women would

have failed to interpret. It was one which seemed to say,—

"Bah, what a farce this making love is after all! As if I didn't already know that this woman adores the very ground upon which I walk! As if any woman could say 'no' to such a splendid, fascinating fellow as myself!"

A conceited, self-satisfied smile. It made the blood boil in Mabel's veins; a torrent of loathing and disgust seemed to rush over her; in one instant it seemed as if the man's true nature were revealed to her.

"He seeks my fortune," she said inwardly, "and he is smiling serenely in anticipation thereof—smiling serenely at my ill-concealed devotion to him! I hate him!"

Clarendon saw at once that she had read in his face the feelings in his heart; his expression changed, assuming a lover-like anxiety that was really edifying.

But a smile had altered the current of two lives—the false yet the beautiful anxiety in those brown eyes failed to bring back the tide of Mabel's love and passion, it only served to strengthen her in the conviction that the man was acting.

She sat back in her chair pale and proud, while the unlooked-for "no" came from lips which curled with scorn.

It was like warm, breathing love transformed into statuesque scorn.

Clarendon could scarcely believe the evidence of his senses. He tried to plead with her. In vain!

"Go," she said, coolly and cuttingly, "and never, Mr. Clarendon, appear to wear your laurels until you have won them."

So much for a smile!

He strode from her presence with curses, not loud but deep, foiled for the first time in his life by a woman, and cursing the lips that had unwarily smiled away a fortune of twenty thousand pounds.

And Ben Morford married the idol of his boyhood and manhood in less than three months after, proving beyond doubt that he tried again, and that Mabel forgot her young Apollo in a cruelly short space of time.

BERYL'S MARRIAGE.

—20—

CHAPTER XXV.

HELEN NUGENT—to call her by the only name she recognized as her own—was by no means easy about her sister; until Audrey left her in April they had never been parted in their lives.

They had all things in common, and were the fondest and closest of companions.

Inferior to her sister in intellect Nell had perhaps a wider knowledge of common every-day things, and as the months wore slowly onwards the poor crippled girl felt convinced first that Audrey's silence covered some strange secret, next that the sister she idolized was engaged in some work or undertaking she knew Nell would disapprove.

Nell had only received two letters from Audrey since they parted; both breathed the warmest affection, both contained remittances, but neither gave an address, and neither told anything definite about the writer's life.

Nell put the money away in her desk till she was able to return it to Audrey. Use it she could not until she knew how her sister had obtained it.

She waited patiently, trying the while to piece together the scanty information Audrey had given so as to form a vague picture of her life; but it was difficult; she had so few materials and what she had seemed to contradict each other.

In the first letter Audrey wrote that she was well and happy; she was earning her living by her brains, and she thought they were more marketable than her fingers. Her movements were so uncertain she could not send Nell an

address at present; she would write again soon meanwhile she sent ten pounds, and Nell was to spend it all, there would be plenty more soon.

Her second letter was even shorter. Audrey wrote that she was spending the summer in the country; she had every luxury possible, and everyone was very kind to her, but she missed Nell terribly, and as soon as ever she could get a little leisure she was coming to spend it at Ventnor.

This letter was some weeks old, and Nell was growing very anxious about her sister.

She herself was better in health; the beautiful air had given her new strength, and her earnings, if small, quite sufficed her wants, even without touching Audrey's bank notes.

The landlady was kind and attentive, besides which two or three people who purchased the dainty work made by the crippled girl hearing of her afflictions and that she was, as one shop-keeper put it, "a reduced gentlewoman," being kindly souls came to see her, bringing little offerings as a new magazine, a few flowers from their gardens, fresh laid eggs or other simple articles of goodwill, and bringing too what Nell prized far more than their gifts, a warm sympathy, a new interest into her life, so that, but for her parting from Audrey and her ever growing anxiety about her sister, the gentle cripple would have been very happy at Ventnor.

She was sitting alone one morning after her early breakfast, fretting just a bit because no letter had come from Audrey, and yet trying to hope for the best, when her landlady came in.

"There's a gentleman waiting to see you on business, Miss Nugent; he says you would not know his name but he is related to Sir Denis Adair," and from the good woman's air of pride it was easy to see a baronet was a very grand person in her eyes.

"Please show him up," said Nell, gently, "Sir Denis Adair was very kind to us when we lived in London."

When Joseph Dent saw the sweet fair face and the fragile, crippled form, he was thankful he had not mentioned Audrey; one glimpse of Nell told him she was of very different metal to her sister; she looked incapable of deceit or unkindness.

"I am very pleased to see you," said Nell, simply. "Sir Denis Adair was very kind to my sister and myself last year in London. We were very poor then, and Sir Denis helped us; it was not only that he found work for Audrey, but he used to come and see us, and make us forget our poverty, just because he seemed to forget it himself."

"Denis Adair is one of the finest fellows going," said Mr. Dent, "but he is in very great trouble, Miss Nugent, and I have come here to-day to see if you can help him."

"It would be like the mouse helping the lion," she said, with a wistful smile, "but I would do my best, Mr.—" she paused, recollecting she did not know her visitor's name.

"Dent, Joseph Dent, that's my name, Miss Nugent. I've a good deal to tell you; but I want to settle Adair's matter first. He married my niece you know."

"I know he married Beryl Chesney," said Nell. "We read it in the *Times*. She was a great heiress."

"Well, she is dying," blurted out Mr. Dent, who was not good at beating about the bush, "and it's my opinion if any power can save her it is yours."

Helen started.

"But I never even saw Lady Adair, Mr. Dent, and—I know nothing of nursing."

"Will you answer me a few questions?" asked Joseph Dent. "If they seem to you rude and unnecessary please remember that I love Beryl Adair as a child of my own—and it is for her sake. Tell me, were you ever engaged to Sir Denis Adair?"

"Engaged to Sir Denis!" exclaimed Helen, her surprise swallowing up any indignation she might have felt. "Why, Mr. Dent, I only saw him once before I heard of his engagement to Miss Chesney. We had no time, opportunity, or inclination to fall in love. I looked on Sir Denis Adair as a friend and benefactor. My affliction

alone would set me apart from love and marriage."

"Thank Heaven!" cried Mr. Dent. "Oh, don't think me mad. I can explain everything. But first, when you left Hinton-street, did you go for one night to a Temperance Hotel in Bloomsbury, and were you there very ill?"

"Yes. I was thought to be dying. My sister had lost her best customers, starvation stared us in the face, and the doctor had said change of air was my only chance. The night we spent at that Temperance hotel was a sort of crisis. Audrey went out early in the morning, leaving me in bed. She made me take some medicine, and I have thought since it was a sleeping draught, for I dozed off, and never woke till two o'clock, when she was standing at my side, and told me we were to go to Ventnor that very afternoon."

"I am going to hurt your feelings," said Mr. Dent, "but you must forgive me. My niece Beryl is dying. I can't let her die without removing the burden from her heart. She believes her husband, Denis Adair, was engaged to you, and foretook you for the sake of her gold."

"But Lady Adair must be mad," said Nell, in a puzzled tone. "I assure you, Sir Denis never spoke a word to me or to him other than warranted by the most ordinary acquaintance."

Very gently Mr. Dent told her the truth. He told her the whole story as he had heard it from Beryl the night before her illness. He went from that to his interview with Audrey, and her point-blank refusal to assist him.

"I could only come to you," he concluded, sadly. "I thought that though guiltless yourself you would yet help me to right the wrong done in your name, and suffer my poor Beryl at least to die in peace."

"I am in your hands," said Helen. "If you wish it I will go back with you to Heron Dyke, or I will sign any paper you like to write out, saying that Sir Denis was never more to me than a casual acquaintance."

"You understand the fraud?"

"I—I am afraid so. Audrey was always bitterly prejudiced against girls happier or better off than ourselves, and I fancied sometimes she cared for Sir Denis. Then she loved me dearly, and I suppose she thought if she made out a plausible story to Miss Chesney she would at one blow gain the money to take me away, and embitter the young bride's happiness; but oh, it was cruel, terrible. I would rather have died at Islington than have had my life prolonged at such a cost."

"Beryl came to see you and believed you dying. She told me she would never have married Sir Denis had she not thought you could hardly live until her wedding-day, and that when you were dead it could not hurt you for her to be his wife."

"I don't ask you to forgive my sister now," said Helen, simply. "Feeling as you do about your niece, you could not do so; but Mr. Dent, when Lady Adair recovers—something tells me that she will recover—and is happy with her husband, will you try and make allowances for Audrey? I was all she had, and she did it for my sake."

"I will remember that you did your best to undo the wrong. Now, my dear, will you write down on a piece of paper that you were never engaged to Sir Denis Adair—that so far from thinking yourself injured by his marriage you knew from the beginning of your acquaintance that he was betrothed to Miss Chesney, and if ever Lady Adair comes to Ventnor you will repeat this statement to her with your own lips!"

Helen drew paper and ink towards her, but before she began to write she said,—

"Audrey is not the only one to blame, Mr. Dent. I am positive this scheme was suggested to her by another. A gentleman called twice in Hinton-street; I saw him going away, but she would not let me meet him. The first time he came he urged something on her and she refused, the second time she yielded. I thought once he had pressed her to marry him, but now I am sure it must have been that he wanted her to try to break off the engagement between Miss Chesney and Sir Denis."

"What was he like? But stay, I can tell you,"

and Mr. Dent described Dick Chesney, fully convinced the man referred to would prove the family black-sheep.

Nell nodded.

"Yes—that would be the man."

She wrote the statement which Mr. Dent had suggested, and signed it with her full name, then as she handed it to him she said anxiously,—

"You saw my sister yesterday, Mr. Dent; will you give me her address, and tell me if she is well and happy? I have not heard from Audrey for weeks, and I can't help feeling anxious about her."

"She is well," he said shortly.

"And," Helen blushed crimson, "is her situation respectable? Oh! don't misunderstand me, but it is all so mysterious, and I am so frightened."

"Your sister is companion to a lady who lives near Heron Dyke, and is on intimate terms with the Adairs. She went there first as a trained nurse."

"But she knows nothing of nursing," broke in Helen.

Mr. Dent shrugged his shoulders.

"When Mrs. Blake recovered she was so much attached to 'Nurse Ann' that she retained her as her lady companion. When I went to see your sister yesterday I had no idea that she was not what she seemed—Miss Newcome."

"And she told you she was Audrey Nugent?"

"She told me she was my wife's niece. Don't start, my dear. I believe it is the truth. Only a month ago I heard that John Chesney had been married twice, and that he had two children when he married Beryl's mother. These girls, Helen and Audrey, were brought up by their aunt, Mrs. Nugent, as her own children, and bore her name. They have been traced down to last December, when they were living in Hinton-street, Islington. A few legal proofs may have to be found, but I feel quite convinced myself you and Audrey are Beryl's half-sisters, and you, as John Chesney's eldest child, would be his sole heiress."

Nell shook her head.

"I would never rob Lady Adair of her fortune. If we are really her half-sisters, perhaps, as she is so rich, she would allow me and Audrey two or three hundred a year, but we should not want more."

Joseph Dent's eyes were not quite dry.

"Ah, my dear, you will think very differently when you have seen your sister. And now I must be going. Thanks to you, I can set Beryl's mind at rest when she recovers consciousness. I don't think you and I are likely to meet again. Your sister and I are too antagonistic; but if ever you need a friend remember, whether the law calls you my niece or not, what you have done for my Beryl to-day, gives you a claim on me I can never forget."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"No change."

The same verdict as the telegram had told him was that which greeted Joseph Dent on his return to Heron Dyke. Sir Denis, white, haggard, and with an expression well-nigh of despair, met him in the hall, and seemed broken down by grief.

"She will pull through," said Uncle Joe, "don't ask me how I know it. I feel sure of it. Beryl will recover, young man, and you'll have to maintain a wife (and family, perhaps) on five thousand a year."

Denis smiled sadly.

"I'd do it on five thousand shillings thankfully rather than lose my darling. I conclude, then, you have heard something fresh about the claimant."

"The claimant is almost a saint, and would be most unlikely to give us any trouble; but she has an ambitious sister, who has made up her mind (these are her own words) to have her rights to the utmost farthing, so you and Lady Adair will have to practise economy, Sir Denis."

"I'm not afraid; and so you have actually seen Beryl's half sisters?"

"And so have you."

"Never!"

"Don't contradict me, sir. Both Helen and Audrey Nugent claim to be intimate friends of yours."

"The Nugents!" He started. "Then I suppose that explains Audrey's half-shadowy likeness to Beryl; it always made me shudder when I noticed it."

"Well, I've very little doubt those two girls are John Chesney's daughters; but till the matter is really proved I'd rather not discuss it. I want to see Beryl out of danger before I trouble about her fortune."

But the fever ran its course, and Mr. Carter looked graver than ever, for day by day it drained Beryl's strength so terribly that it seemed doubtful if she would have sufficient vital force to rally from it. Her aunt nursed her devotedly. The trained nurse from London, Miss Carter, carried out the doctor's (her uncle, by the way,) orders with unflinching faithfulness. Jane and Mrs. Curtis gave their best efforts, but still, excepting Uncle Joe (who never lost hope), everyone was full of fear that all their devotion would be in vain, and Beryl Adair would slip away from the clinging clasp of those who loved her, and vanish into the valley of the shadow of death.

At last there came a night which Mr. Carter said would be the crisis; Beryl would recover consciousness; on that moment all depended. After it she would either fall into a healthy natural sleep and be practically out of danger, or sink into a lethargy from which there would be no waking.

Mr. Dent took the doctor aside when he arrived that evening and had a word with him before he entered the sick room.

"Look here, sir, whatever happens you must let me see Beryl. I was the last person she spoke to before her illness, and she told me the trouble at her heart. I've found out, Mr. Carter, that trouble never need have been. My niece was the victim of a cruel plot. Only let me have one moment with Beryl when she is conscious and I can make her so happy that she will recover just because she wants to live."

Mr. Carter sighed.

"I only hope you may be right," he said, kindly; "anyway you shall have your chance."

With quiet insistence Mr. Carter refused to allow Sir Denis Adair to be within sight of the bed at the time of the expected crisis.

"Agitation might be fatal," he told him.

"While there is hope we must do nothing rash; everything depends on Lady Adair's awakening."

"At least you will call me to say good-bye!" pleaded Denis when he had reluctantly been banished to the landing.

"You may count on me."

Mr. Dent shared his exile. The housekeeper and Jane had been sent to bed; only Miss Carter, the doctor, and Mr. Dent kept their vigil within the room where Beryl lay with closed eyes seemingly asleep.

"It will be about midnight," Mr. Carter had predicted, and surely enough only a few moments after the hour had chimed Beryl moved restlessly and then feebly opened her eyes.

The fever light had died out of them, the fever flush had faded from her cheek, she was white as the pillow on which her head rested; the head which had been robbed of its wealth of chestnut hair, and now had only little clustering rings of silky brown just like a child's.

She raised her eyes and fixed them on Mr. Dent's with a look of recognition which touched his heart.

"Dear Uncle Joe!"

"My darling!" said Uncle Joe, simply. "You've been ill, and given us all a lot of trouble; but now, please Heaven, you're going to get better!"

She put one hand to her head as though to help her memory.

"Was I going to run away? Did you come and stop me?"

"I met you in the grounds, dear. I don't know where you were going, but you came back to the house with me and gave me some dinner."

Doctor and nurse were in the distance.

Mr. Dent lowered his voice, he understood so well the question in Beryl's eyes.

"You told me all that was troubling you, dear, and while you were ill I went to Ventnor and saw 'Nell.' Beryl, look up and listen to me. You have been the victim of a cruel fraud, dear. This 'Nell' was never anything to your husband, or to her but an ordinary acquaintance. She says he was kind to her and gave her work, but she knew from the first he was engaged to you. It's just as I told you, Beryl, someone who wanted you to keep single trumped up this story. You need never have doubted your husband once."

"He'll never forgive me now," said Beryl, slowly; "I must have worn out his love, or he would be here now."

Mr. Dent left the room, and seized hold of Denis.

"She wants you!"

"To say good-bye!" asked Denis, brokenly, as he followed Mr. Dent.

"No; to tell her to live for your sake," and that was just what Denis did.

Folding his arms round the slight fragile form, and pressing his wife to his heart as he had never been allowed to do in all the months of their married life, he kissed her passionately, and told her she must get well for his sake. He could not spare her; he should be so lonely without her.

"I should like to get well," she answered; "but I feel so tired—so very tired," and even as she spoke her pretty head fell back on her husband's shoulder; and she slept the wearied exhausted sleep which comes after long illness.

"She will do now," said Mr. Carter to Uncle Joe, as they noiselessly filed out of the room, leaving Denis alone with his wife.

The crisis was past; but it was days before those that loved her could feel Beryl was really out of danger. She was such a fragile shadowy creature, whose big eyes looked too large for the small wan face, that Denis told her she was more like a child than a grown-up woman, and Uncle Joe said if she didn't take care people would be asking leave to exhibit her in a penny show as a walking skeleton.

The Dents had been at Heron Dyke nearly seven weeks, and began to yearn for their own home when Mr. Carter pronounced Beryl able to travel, provided she had an invalid carriage and every care; and when Denis asked where he should take her she smiled and whispered,—

"Broadgate! You know I should have liked to go there for our honeymoon, only you said it would be too cold in December; and, Denis, bend your ear closer dear, and let me whisper. I think this will be our real honeymoon after all."

"So do I," said Denis, fondly; "if you will only make haste and get well, we shall be the happiest couple in Kent. We have a great many arrears to make up for."

"Arrears of happiness! And it was all my fault. I wonder sometimes, Denis, you don't hate me!"

"There's not much fear of that, my darling. Beryl, do you feel well enough for me to talk to you rather seriously? There are one or two things I ought to tell you before you meet even our small world again."

She looked up with a smile.

"I can bear to listen to anything, Denis, so that you love me."

"My love will never fail you dear. It never did even in our darkest days. What I have to tell you may trouble you; but you had better hear it from me than by accident from a stranger. Will it pain you very much, Beryl, if you are no longer an heiress?"

"Have we lost all our money, Denis? Oh!" in a pained tone, "shall we have to leave this dear old place?"

"Heron Dyke is ours, dear, and five thousand a year. You will have about five hundred for pocket-money; but it seems your father left two other daughters, and the elder will take all you thought yours."

"Two sisters!" exclaimed Beryl in amazement. "It sounds incredible; and oh, Denis, you haven't married an heiress after all."

"I have married my life's love which is better," he answered, fondly; "and, besides, your fortune

freed Heron Dyke and saved our home from the clutches of Mr. Blake; so you see I was mercenary after all. For the rest I think and believe we shall be quite as rich as is good for us, and I for one don't grudge the new Miss Chesney her fortune."

"But where is she, Denis?"

With her hand in his Denis Adair told his wife the story of Helen and Audrey Nugent; he kept back nothing from the day of his first meeting Audrey at the Museum. Then he told her of the conspiracy between Dick Chesney and Audrey to part himself and Beryl.

"If I had only told you the truth, Denis, on our wedding day," whispered his wife; "but I could not bear to speak to you of the girl I believed my rival."

"If you only had! I could have explained everything at once; but, Beryl, don't fret over the past, dear, it is dead and buried; we have a lifetime of love before us."

But Beryl clung to him nervously.

"I wish she wasn't my sister, Denis. It's not the money. Nell is welcome to it all, but I am afraid of Audrey. I can't bear to think she is my sister."

"She has played no sister's part to you," said Denis, gravely, "and I will never let her see you. I never was so disappointed in anyone in my life—unless in Dick Chesney."

"You are thinking of his share in our estrangement," said Beryl.

"And of his last act of wickedness. If you'll believe me, Beryl, he actually presented himself at the school where Blake's twin girls are being educated. He brought a letter, apparently from their mother, asking that the elder, Adela, might return to the Hall under his guardianship. It appears they had met in the Easter holidays, and corresponded clandestinely ever since. Before poor Blake had the least idea of anything being wrong he received a copy of their marriage certificate. Adela was just sixteen on her wedding-day."

"How dreadful! After all, Aunt Julia was not too hard on him."

"No, I believe it was he who first told Audrey Nugent of her rights. We have all been so anxious about you, Beryl, that we have hardly thought of anything beyond your sick room; but I quite expect by this time all the legal evidence is ready and your half-sister's claim complete. Mr. Dent was saying only to-day he should call on Major Trevlyn—the chief witness for Helen and Audrey—as soon as he gets back to town. Your uncle thinks it useless to offer any opposition if the lawyer accepts the proofs of the girls' parentage; but I think you ought to have a voice in the matter."

"The money brought me nothing but anxiety and unhappiness," said Beryl, "and if you are content with a penniless wife I would much rather not resist this claim."

CHAPTER XXVII.

SIR DENIS and Lady Adair went to Broadgate, which was looking its brightest in the warm September sunshine, and the Dents returned to the Oaks, well content with the result of their visit to their niece; for though it had been a time of much anxiety and grief, both knew now that they need have no fears for the success of Beryl's marriage. Even poverty, or comparative poverty rather, could make no difference to Sir Denis and his wife.

"It's strange, wife, we've heard nothing from Colonel Trevlyn. I gave that girl Audrey his address, and when she once went to him the case would lie in a nutshell. The Adairs have borne the blow nobly, but still, for their sake, there ought to be no long waiting. It will be much better for them to have the matter settled definitely."

"Of course, Joe. Perhaps, though, Colonel Trevlyn has heard of Beryl's illness, and would not trouble you while we were in such anxiety."

"Perhaps," admitted Mr. Dent, doubtfully; "but if you had seen Miss Audrey Chesney, wife, you wouldn't credit her with much delicacy of

feeling. I never hated any young woman so much in my life."

"Well, if I were you, Joe, I'd call on the Colonel to-morrow."

Mr. Dent met with a surprise. Colonel Trevlyn said he had received a visit from Miss Audrey Chesney, who convinced him of her identity, and promised to return with her sister in three days' time.

"If you'll believe me, Mr. Dent," went on the Colonel, "that's nearly seven weeks ago, and I have never set eyes on her since."

"But I suppose she has written."

"She has done nothing of the kind. She left me no address, so I am powerless to communicate with her. The whole affair is so mysterious that but for the undoubted resemblance to poor John I should feel disposed to look upon her as an impostor."

"I saw her once," said Mr. Dent, "and she seemed so eager about the fortune I should have said she would have lost no time in claiming it."

"Precisely the impression she gave me. I own I am utterly at sea; but for hearing of Lady Adair's illness and desiring to trouble you at such a time I should have written to you on the subject before."

"Well," said Mr. Dent thoughtfully, "after all Audrey is the younger sister. The elder, Nell or Helen, is the person most nearly concerned. I have her address, and I should be happy to call on her with you if you like. Sir Denis Adair takes his wife's loss of fortune very cheerfully; but still he ought to know the truth as soon as possible, it makes rather a difference to a man whether his wife has three hundred thousand pounds or—fifteen."

"It does, indeed," said Colonel Trevlyn feelingly. "Oh, I forgot to say that I received a call from a Mr. Richard Chesney last week. It seems Audrey signed a paper promising for 'value received' to pay him twenty thousand pounds when she was acknowledged as John Chesney's daughter. Mr. Chesney pressed for an immediate settlement."

"I've no doubt he did."

"Of course I told him that in the first place I had not the charge of the money, and in the next that it was Helen, not Audrey, who succeeded to it, and that so far as I could see the latter had not the chance of gaining twenty thousand pounds herself, much less of having twenty thousand pounds to give away."

"And what did he say?"

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders.

"He blustered a good deal, but I got rid of him at last. Well, Mr. Dent, since you are so kind as to place yourself at my disposal I propose we go to Ventnor to-morrow."

And they did.

Helen rose up to receive them in a plain black dress, and with a far sadder look on her face than Mr. Dent had seen there on his last visit. Her first question was an inquiry for Lady Adair.

"At Broadgate with her husband, as happy as a queen, and making a steady progress towards convalescence," he answered, adding in a lower tone, "all of which she owes under Heaven to you."

"I am so thankful," said Nell; and then she waited for the gentlemen to explain the object of their visit.

"I saw your sister some weeks ago," began the Colonel, "in relation to the Chesney property, and she promised to come back in three days with you. I have heard nothing since."

Nell looked astonished.

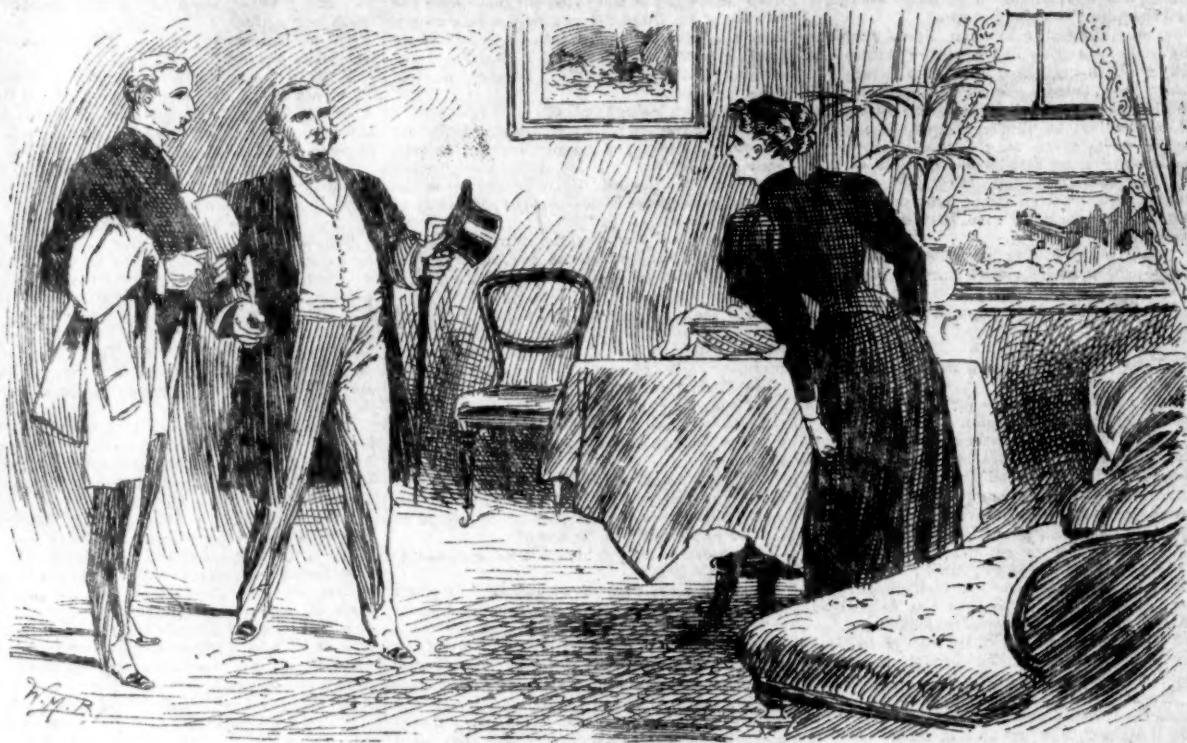
"The accident was in all the papers. I never doubted your reading it or I would have written."

"But you don't mean your sister was hurt, surely," asked Mr. Dent kindly.

"The train started again after it had stopped, while several persons were getting out; two or three were badly shaken, but Audrey lost her footing and fell to the ground, striking her head violently against the metal of the steps; she was picked up quite dead."

Both gentlemen expressed their sympathy.

"And you never saw her again?" said Joseph Dent; "that seems cruelly hard."



HELEN ROSE TO RECEIVE HER VISITORS AND AT ONCE INQUIRED AFTER LADY ADAIR.

Helen looked at him with a sad smile.

"If I had to lose her I think I am glad I did not see her once again. You see Audrey and I had been the whole world to each other. We had never had a single difference, and—if we had met there must have been things said which would have made it impossible for us ever to be quite the same again. I like to think that Audrey never knew I blamed or doubted her. I like to feel I never said one harsh word to her."

"And now," said Mr. Dent, feeling it much easier to contemplate Beryl's loss now that it would no longer enrich Audrey, "it only remains for you to claim your father's property. Beryl and her husband will raise not the smallest opposition, and when a few legal proceedings are completed you will be one of the richest heiresses in England."

Nell shook her head.

"And what should I do with wealth? What happiness could it bring me, crippled, deformed? How could I go into the great world, and mix with people who in their hearts looked down on me. No, if Audrey had lived I might have hesitated, but as things are my path is plain. Lady Adair must keep the fortune she has so long thought hers; if it is necessary for me to sign any paper relinquishing my rights I will do so gladly; but what I should prefer would be to bury those rights in silence, to keep the secret of my birth, and to remain Helen Nugent. If in time to come my half-sister liked to settle a small income on me I should not refuse it, and if, when she has recovered completely from her long illness she could forget the past sufficiently to see me, I should gladly be on friendly terms with her; my life is a very lonely one now, and she is the nearest relation I have in the world."

"You mustn't say that, my dear," said Uncle Joe, quite forgetting how indignant he had been when Audrey called him by that name, "you've an uncle and aunt, and I know if you will come home with me my wife will make you welcome for as long as you like to stay."

Nell looked at him questioningly.

"I could not bear to hear anyone speak hardly of Audrey; I know she acted cruelly to Lady Adair, but—"

"My wife knows no details of the past, she need know none," said Mr. Dent, "but I won't press the matter now; she shall send you an invitation herself."

And so it came about that while Beryl and her husband still lingered at Broadgate Nell became a welcome guest at the Oaks.

And Aunt Julia was entirely won over to her opinion; if Beryl with her beauty and grace had found a fortune a sore encumbrance in her maiden days what would it not be to this poor lonely creature, crippled, deformed, and without any close friends?

Nell pleaded she should always feel a robber and an alien if she despoiled Beryl; she should never marry so after all the property must revert to the Adaïrs when she died. Why should they spend the best part of their lives with slender means just because she was four years Beryl's senior?

Mrs. Dent was so much won over by this reasoning that she went down to Broadgate and expounded it to the Adaïrs. Nell, she said, would have a thousand a year from her distant cousin, Mrs. Richard Chesney, and that was quite enough for her modest wants; why should Beryl and Denis pinch themselves to thrust riches on one who could not value them?

And in the end Nell had her way; Beryl came to see her. What passed at that interview no one ever knew; but after it Lady Adair told her husband Nell must have her way, and there was a dear little house on the Heron Dyke estate which she thought would just suit her sister.

For Helen yielded that much; she would be "Miss Chesney" and known to the world as Lady Adair's half-sister, but rob Beryl of her wealth she simply would not.

The Blakes had forgiven Dick, and will it be believed, settled an income on him and Adela? But at an interview with Mr. Chesney Joseph

Dent made it very plain to him he must not attempt to live at Heron Dyke. Perhaps the ex-secretary was tired of the country and the Blake ménage, anyway, he explained to his father-in-law money went further abroad, and he should prefer to pitch his tent in Paris.

Between Helen and Lady Adair a true sisterly affection sprang up, and they grew very dear to each other; but Beryl never took Audrey's place in Nell's heart; no one could do that.

With the June roses a little son was born to the Adaïrs, and perhaps this child's birth reconciled Beryl as nothing else had done to accepting Nell's sacrifice; she was ambitious for her child, and liked to think he was heir to the thousands she had despised.

As for Denis, his old dream of married happiness was fulfilled at last. He and Beryl grew only nearer and dearer in the years which followed little Roy's birth.

Heron Dyke is the happiest home in all that country side, and no one seeing Sir Denis and Lady Adair now would ever guess the cloud which darkened the first months of their married life.

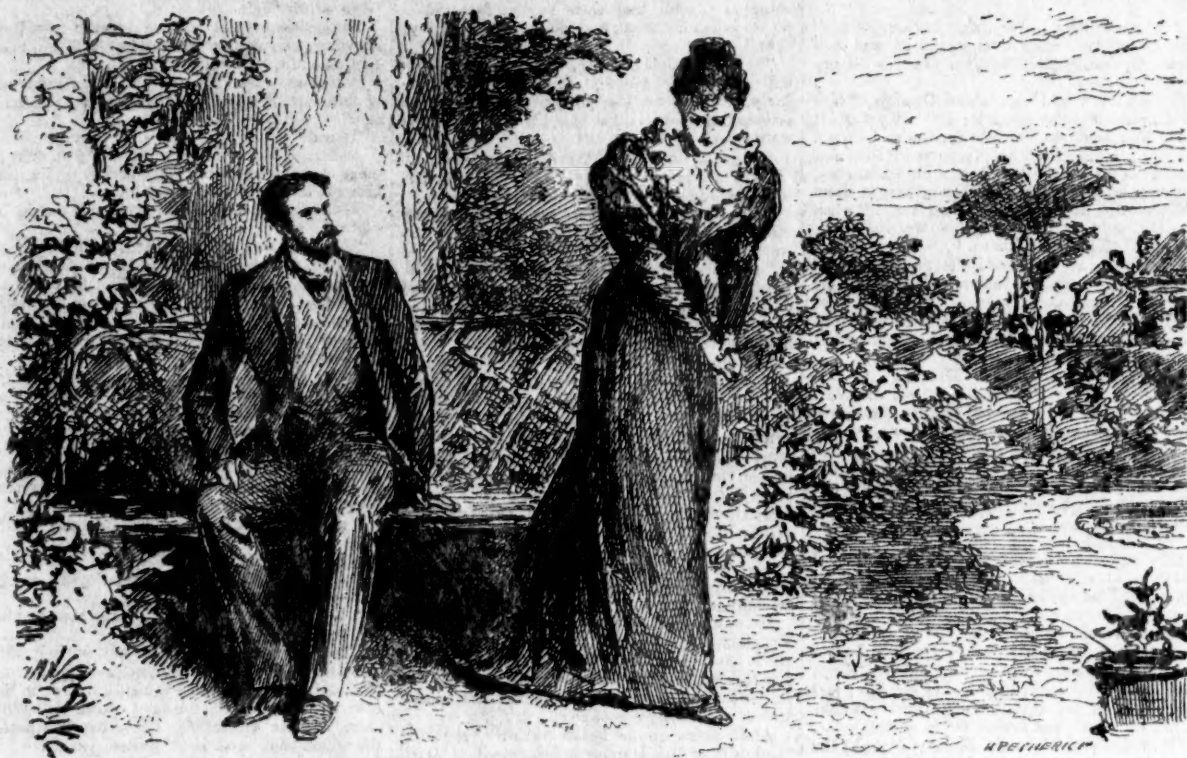
A grave sweet-faced woman with a gentle voice and a quiet grace which makes one forget her crippled form is quite at home in the Heron Dyke nursery, and a prime favourite with the children, to whom "Aunt Nell" is a willing slave.

"All's well that ends well," Mrs. Dent remarked to her husband once after a happy visit at Heron Dyke; "but Joe, you will never understand how anxious I was once about

'BERYL'S MARRIAGE.'

[THE END]

ROSE-TINTED celery is a novelty of the market. Mixed with clear white and set in a nest of tender, green lettuce hearts, covered with golden mayonnaise, it adds appreciably to a pretty study in colour.



IVY STARTED UP WITH A PASSIONATE GESTURE OF REBELLION AND DISSENT.

THE ROMANCE OF IVY MOSS.

—101—

CHAPTER XVII.

A NEW VISTA.

THE lighted windows of the dining-room did not face in this direction; all the same, Ivy hurried nervously through the misty grounds, as if vigilant eyes were in the rear of her and her movements were being observed.

Once or twice she fancied that she was actually followed stealthily by someone, that footsteps brushed the grass behind her; but, when she glanced half-fearfully around her, there was nothing anywhere visible save the trees and their shadows, and the moonlight which gave such fantastic shape to them.

Overhead the clear white stars were thickening and palpitating; a breath of wind travelled mournfully through the dark plantation boughs.

It did not take Ivy many minutes, by this narrow winding path across the park, to reach the lonely wicket in the churchyard wall; moreover, by this time it had become familiar ground to her, and familiar ground is quickly traversed always.

Valley church itself was a low gray building with a short square tower, three-parts clad with creepers.

It was very sheltered; very silent; all around it, closely packed, lay the happy dead at rest.

In a remote corner, the least crowded of any, where wild honeysuckle and ragged robin topped the low flint wall of the churchyard, and where, in the springtime, violets both purple and white might be found in hiding amongst the moss, and daffodils lifted their heavy yellow heads to nod them bell-like in the wet west wind—here, sleeping peacefully in this sweet and shady spot, lay the little lad Derrick, who was not really lost to her, Ivy knew, but only “gone before;” in all the wide world the solitary human tie that once had rendered life truly dear unto her!

Marking the place where the kind earth covered

him, where the shorn turf grew greenly over the little mound, stood a slender marble cross, pure, chaste, cold, white as unsullied snow—erected by Keith Falconer.

Upon the cross, in letters of gold, were engraved the child's name; his brief span of life; and, beneath the dear name, those bright words of the Good Shepherd which are as balm to the heart of every grieving mother not yet grown old in motherhood.

“In loving memory of Roderick Dundas; aged five years.”

“Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God.”

Time, merciful as it ever is, had softened the first sharp agony of her loss; and Ivy could now kneel in silence, and without tears, by the tiny grave of her little angel.

The night was warm, notwithstanding the low-lying mist and the fallen dew; an early bat, or some other grim winged creature of the darkness, swept low by the churchyard wall.

Plaintively across the dim fields from a distant farm-shed came the lowing of cattle; the faint “tinkle-tinkle” of a sheep-bell; weirdly peeped the primrose moon through the stark and blackened belfry bars.

The flowers which Ivy had brought hither with her yesterday were not yet withered. In the moon-lit gloom, with the dew upon them, they were faintly fragrant still.

Close-wrapped in her long dark silken cloak, with the hood of it drawn over her hair, Ivy sank upon her knees by the slender marble cross and wound her arms desolately about it.

Chill as death's touch itself it struck to her brow; ice-cold as the dawn-wind of a winter morn.

And yet, as she knelt there, a great peace, a sense of infinite calm and gratitude, seemed to steal over her heart—nay, to fill her whole being;

and prayer was in that sad heart of hers, if not upon her lips.

Perhaps, after all—who shall tell!—she was thankful that little Derrick was indeed at rest; utterly beyond the reach of all earthly suffering; that life's bitter sorrows and manifold disappointments could never touch him now, never touch him more!

Ah! would that she too were there, and at peace, beyond the eternal stars, in Heaven with her darling; that her future were as safe as that little child's!

Their spirits—her own and the little lad's—in such an hour as this, seemed always very near together; although Ivy herself was still a pilgrim upon earth, and Derrick was “at home with God.”

A hand, with infinite gentleness, touched her bowed head lingeringly; and, in momentary dumb terror, Ivy started to her feet.

There, in the moonlight, by the little new grave, stood Keith Falconer.

“Lady Eke told me that I should find you here,” he said, just as kindly and as quietly as if they had parted only on the day before. “It is late, Mrs. Dundas—the grass hereabout is very long and damp, you know. Will you not come home!”

And so it was by Derrick's white cross in Valley churchyard that Ivy and Keith Falconer met again!

She wanted to tell him how grateful she was for all his goodness; but somehow she could not; and he too, on his part, seemed strangely distant and timid.

Speech was difficult for both; and they spoke hardly a word going homeward.

In silence, with a full and an aching heart, she had turned from the little grave; and in silence Mr. Falconer had followed her.

Once she ventured to say,—

“Do you know where Ronald is?”

And Keith answered as gently,—

“Yes. He is abroad with Count Ravenna.”

"And then there was silence again between them.

But presently Lady Exe, having lost all patience at Ivy's tardy reappearance, was seen advancing swiftly towards them over the silvery lawn.

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Cynthia, "how can you be so indiscreet, Ivy; and not yet May, too! You want to catch your death, I should imagine; and really I had almost said that you deserve to do so. Well," went on the Countess, impatiently, perceiving that they neither of them had a word of any kind ready just then, "what does Ivy say to your proposition, Mr. Falconer? She ought to fall in love with it!"

"We have not discussed the question yet," replied Keith, trying to answer Cynthia in his own natural, pleasant manner. "I think now, Lady Exe, that the matter had better wait until to-morrow. I am sure Mrs. Dundas is much too fatigued to listen to me to-night."

"Good gracious," cried Cynthia, in her brightest and bluntest fashion, "not discussed the question yet! Why, what in the world have you been talking about then? Ludovic, who is dying for a cigar and a chat with you, Mr. Falconer, would have it that you and Mrs. Dundas had lost your way—perhaps strayed into the water cress brook—and he wanted to come and look for you himself."

Ivy waited to hear no more.

Like a ghost she stole away from them, and glided into the house; across the hall; up the stairs; and, as she had done on returning from their drive in the afternoon, she gained her own rooms and there locked herself in.

She felt fit only for her own society.

Badly enough she slept on that night of Keith Falconer's brief sojourn at Valley Grange; and as a matter of course in the morning she awoke but ill refreshed, and feeling far from well.

When Lady Exe's maid Nanette brought the warm water for her bath, Ivy told the smart abigail to give her—Mrs. Dundas's—love to the Countess, and to say that she would not be down to breakfast.

Mrs. Dundas would rather take the meal—merely some tea and a little dry toast—alone upstairs in her own dressing-room.

Nanette, in her province, was a treasure.

The tea and the toast which she presently appeared with were precisely as Ivy liked to have them.

A tepid bath and this slight breakfast seemed to do her a great deal of good.

About ten o'clock she went downstairs, and, armed with a book and a Japanese umbrella, made her way forthwith out into the garden.

It was a lovely morning; warm, clear, and with a high and cloudless sky—a real foretaste of the summer that was now so near at hand.

The turf of the wide neat lawns was hardly yet dry; in the shade the dew still lingered, glistening upon drooping grasses and budding fronds; in the sunlight floated the fairy gossamer, perhaps like the severed threads in the magic web of the Lady of Shalott.

Ivy sat down upon a wooden seat under the elms; and, forgetting the book which she had brought with her out of doors, fell to listening idly to the cawing of the rooks in the faintly rustling elm-tops overhead.

She brought her eyes earthward with a start, for footsteps were approaching.

She saw then that the great glass garden-doors were open, and that Lord Exe and his beautiful young wife were coming towards her.

Rather to Ivy's surprise, Cynthia herself was dressed for travelling; looking simply bewitching in a perfectly-fitting brown tailor-made gown and large brown "picture" hat.

The Earl too was wearing a new spring overcoat, with snow-white scarf and gold horse-shoe pin. There was "Bond-street" in every seam of this young man's clothes.

"What, you are going to town!" Ivy exclaimed involuntarily; when the Countess had kissed her in her hearty affectionate fashion, and his lordship had crushed their guest's hand within his, hoping fervently that Ivy was feeling "a lot better."

"Yes, I have a heap of shopping to do,"

replied Cynthia, briskly; "and Ludovic is going to Cribb's and then on to Tattersall's. So we lunch in town, and don't you wait, Ivy, dear."

"I imagine, Lord Exe, that Mr. Falconer will accompany you!" observed Ivy, carelessly, turning to the young man, who was pressing against his lips the silver crook of his walking-stick.

"Well—er—no, Mrs. Dundas—not exactly," he was beginning to reply; when Cynthia herself struck in,—

"No, dear Ivy. When we are out of the way Mr. Falconer is coming out to talk to you. So we will be off, Ludovic," cried she.

"Cynthia," Ivy said rather stiffly, "I should very much like to accompany you and Lord Exe to town this morning. I also have some shopping to do; and if you will wait for me I will not be five minutes putting on my things."

"Out of the question, my dear," answered Lady Exe, blithely. "We are in an awful hurry, and can wait for no one. Take care of yourself—goodbye!"

She laughed gaily, and hurried her husband away towards the front of the house, almost before that obedient and infatuated young man himself could snatch off his hat in adieu.

Cynthia was still his bright exacting empress; he still remained her willing and adoring slave.

And even as they went from Ivy to the carriage, Mr. Falconer joined her under the elms in the garden.

He was perfectly calm and self-possessed this morning, and sat down by her side upon the rustic seat. His self-command, indeed, enabled Ivy to keep her own. However, tranquil and unmoved as she appeared outwardly, the heart-beats within were stormy enough.

After a few common-place remarks, touching the health of Mrs. Dundas and the weather, Keith Falconer pulled out his watch, observing thoughtfully,—

"I have to catch the 12.25 from Valley up to town. It is a quick train fortunately. Lord and Lady Exe drove, I believe."

"I fancy so," answered Ivy, more coldly than she intended.

"So pardon me, Mrs. Dundas," he continued, "if I hurry on to tell you what I have to say; what, indeed, I came down to Valley Grange expressly to talk over with you—with you and no one else."

"It would be a pity to miss your train, Mr. Falconer. Believe me, I am listening," said Ivy.

And speaking, she put aside leisurely her Japanese umbrella, and the book in her hand; laying them together for the present upon the seat at her side.

Then she folded her hands in her lap, and waited. He regarded her keenly for an instant; then said, with no further preamble,—

"Lady Exe tells me, Mrs. Dundas, that your future movements are still all undecided; but that you were saying to her and her husband a little while ago it was possible you might enter a Convent or a Sisterhood. Is that right?"

"It is quite right. I did say so. And I meant it."

"Of which convent in London were you thinking, I wonder?" said Mr. Falconer gently.

"The Sisterhood of the Convent of St. Marcella," answered Ivy, as quietly as he. "I have heard about it from many people."

"It is a singular decision, Mrs. Dundas, for you to arrive at," mused Keith aloud.

"I have determined nothing definite, so far. I merely say the thing is possible. But why 'singular,' Mr. Falconer?" said Ivy, with something like scorn. "Am I then the first unhappy and forsaken woman, think you, who has grown sick of the world and of life, and who longs with a passionate longing for that peace which the world cannot give? It may not be exactly heaven within those convent walls; nevertheless there may be found within them tranquillity of mind, with hard useful work, and, above all, a peace that is as the reflex of the peace of heaven itself. I ask, I expect no more—now—so long as I live!"

"Mrs. Dundas, have I your whole attention?" inquired Mr. Falconer.

The gentleness and the gravity were gone from his voice; his manner was prompt and business-like, but kind as ever.

"Of course," she answered, with a faint touch of petulance, "I told you that you had a minute ago."

"Good."

And then Keith Falconer proceeded at once to make clear to Ivy Dundas the errand which had brought him down to Valley Grange.

With another rapid glance at his watch, he said:

"You tell me that you are sick of the world and its ways; that you long for quiet, peace, and yet not an idle tranquillity—a retired life, in short, and a useful one. I think that I can help you to find what you desire to attain, Mrs. Dundas, without your going to the grave length of entering a Sisterhood like that of St. Marcella."

"You can—really can?" she said eagerly, glancing at him for an instant with interest and curiosity combined.

"Yes. I dare say you have not forgotten our conversation about—about Huntingtower; I mean the conversation we had about the old house and its people when—when we were at Stoke Bay that year!" said Keith, hesitating a little now.

"Huntingtower!" echoed Ivy faintly—"Huntingtower!"

"Yes, Huntingtower; Ronald Dundas's old home," replied Keith, this time quite firmly. "Surely you remember!"

"I—I remember perfectly," she assured him, in a low, uncertain voice.

"Well, Mrs. Dundas, it rests now entirely with yourself," said Keith earnestly. "You can—should it so please you—you can, there, in the old home of your husband down in Wiltshire, find for a certainty the quiet and useful life which your soul is at present yearning for. Listen to me—do be advised by me—I beg of you, Mrs. Dundas! Dismiss straightway that solemn and uncomfortable thoughts of immuring yourself within narrow, dreary convent walls; and bravely go and do the good work that awaits you at Huntingtower!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

COULD SHE DO IT?

HUNTINGTOWER, of all places on the created earth!

What did Mr. Falconer mean?

How in the world was Ivy, the unknown and the unacknowledged wife of Ronald Dundas—how was she to go to the old home of her lost husband, the doors of which had been for so long closed against him; the old ancestral home from which he, for his sins, as she supposed, had been so long an exile!

Why—how—should she go!

For Ivy herself it was all too extraordinary to comprehend.

She had never set eyes upon Huntingtower.

She had never, indeed, expected to do so.

In his wife's hearing, Ronald himself had never in any manner alluded to the home of his grandfather; the fine old family place and estate to which he—Ronald Dundas—had once been the recognised heir.

And now here, to her unspeakable amazement, was Keith Falconer assuring Ronald's wife that a peaceful life and good work also awaited her—Ivy—at Huntingtower!

Figuratively speaking, Mr. Falconer had taken away the breath of Ivy Dundas.

"Really—really I do not in the least understand you," she stammered at last.

"I will explain it all to you as briefly as I can," he answered readily.

And he did so; Ivy listening eagerly meanwhile.

It appeared that quite recently Mr. Falconer himself had been staying down in Wiltshire at Papillon Court; having gone thither on a few days' visit to his old college friend, James Papillon, the elder brother of the young man "Hughie," the whilom bachelor friend of the Earl of Exe, whom in company with his lordship

Ivy had met, more than eighteen months ago, by the sea at Stoke Bay.

Papillon Court, as Mr. Falconer had once told her, was, as the crow flies, but a mile or so distant from the mansion of Huntingtower, the ancestral home of the Dundas family.

As a friend and connection of the Dundases, Keith Falconer had, as a matter of course, gone to Huntingtower to call on Mrs. Falconer—the widow of that soldier "cousin" of his who years ago had died of fever in Burmah—and her father the old baronet, Ronald's grandfather.

Both Mrs. Falconer and her father were, in these days, Ivy heard, confirmed invalids; and inhabited different portions of the old mansion.

In fact, the baronet, now a very old man indeed, and long since broken hopelessly in health by his manifold troubles and infirmities, was simply in a dotage-state—nothing less; quite a helpless and childish old man, Keith explained to Ivy.

A faithful valet, grown gray in service at Huntingtower, was in attendance upon his aged master both day and night.

The entire management of the estate was in admirable hands; and the shrewd and honest agent at the head of affairs had been old Sir Roderick's business right-hand for many years past.

Life at Huntingtower, indeed, being an affair so quiet, so simple, so wholly uneventful in every direction, the expenses of the household were in consequence absurdly small for the position of a family as wealthy as were the Dundases.

Therefore, at the baronet's death, Mr. Falconer hinted, a rich inheritance must necessarily fall to the lot of—well, to the lot of whomever the old man's wealth should ultimately prove to be willed.

Doubtless, in the first instance, Ronald himself being disinherited, utterly disowned and cast off, it would all pass naturally enough to Mrs. Falconer—Ronald's aunt—should she survive her father.

But her own life was so frail and uncertain a one; so unlikely to touch the borderland, even, of old age—what was to become of Huntingtower and all the fat lands appertaining thereto when Isobel Falconer, also, should have gone to her rest.

It was a serious reflection, said Keith Falconer impressively.

For Ronald Dundas was unquestionably the rightful heir.

What, then, was to become of all this carefully-garnered wealth, should old Sir Roderick die—as he might any day—in his present childish yet obstinate condition of mind; unrelenting, inexorable, hard and unforgiving to the last?

"Now, Mrs. Dundas," said Keith boldly; "it seems to me that your duty lies straight before you. A noble revenge is, as it were, brought easily within your grasp. Take the opportunity that is now open to you of heaping coals of fire upon Ronald's head; and go, just as early as you can make it convenient to start—to Huntingtower."

Ivy's companion and adviser merely bewildered her. She could neither follow him nor catch the drift of his meaning.

She told him so.

"Really you must put things more plainly to me if you wish me to comprehend what it is that you are counselling," she said rather helplessly.

"I will. I hope sincerely that my proposition will carry no offence with it—nay, I believe that you are too sensible a woman, Mrs. Dundas," said Keith Falconer, gently, "to be offended where no offence is meant; but only honest, wholesome, practical advice. Well, to the point."

"For a number of years past—in reality ever since, or almost ever since, the date of the tragic shock which befell her in the loss of her beloved only child—Mrs. Falconer has been accustomed to keep in her service at Huntingtower a person of superior manners and education, who has been to her a kind of friend, companion, and nurse sometimes, in one—someone, indeed, who has brought with her a fair knowledge of and experience in domestic matters generally, and

who has been qualified to consult with the house-keeper, Mrs. Whinney, in all important questions relating to household affairs.

"Mrs. Falconer's attendant and companion must likewise be able to read aloud distinctly; to write a good clear hand; must be cheerful in demeanour, yet noiseless in movement; and, of course, above everything, should at all times be patient and forbearing with the occasionally querulous moods of a delicate and nervous sufferer.

"The salary which Mrs. Falconer offers to this companion-nurse of hers is, I think she said, either sixty or seventy pounds a year," announced Keith, with a sort of quizzically-inquiring smile at Ivy as he spoke; "but you perceive, Mrs. Dundas, that the post in question is no sinecure. Do you follow me now?"

"Yes—now I begin to. At least—at least I fancy that I do," came Ivy's faint reply.

Many thoughts and sensations were stirring within her brain—and no wonder!

"Circumstances," said Keith Falconer quietly, "circumstances have so brought it about that the post of companion-nurse to the mistress of the house at Huntingtower is at this present moment vacant."

And he looked again earnestly at Ivy.

"You think," said she, after a silence, the words causing her no slight effort—"you think that—that I am the person sought, who might meet with the approval of Mrs. Falconer? That it is I who should lose no time in offering myself as a candidate for the—the situation?"

"I do," he answered simply.

"You think," spoke Ivy again, not without an accent of bitterness, "that between the invalid quiet of Huntingtower and the holy calm of the Convent of St. Marcella the balance as regards monotony is about equal? that the one for me would be as good a refuge as the other!—the distractions and frivolities of the world being shut out from both but silence and work excluded from neither?"

Keith smiled—a smile that was just a trifle sad and thoughtful.

"You say that you yearn for peace and quiet, and are yet at the same time desirous to find good work," he observed. "Surely it must be better to seek these things in a quiet and refined English home in the country than in a rigid sisterhood in noisy London. Do you not agree with me then?" he persisted.

"Mr. Falconer," said Ivy dully, ignoring this last direct appeal, "you have some other motive in persuading me to go to Huntingtower. You hinted as much a few minutes ago."

He answered her frankly.

"Yes," he said; "I mentioned that your going to Ronald Dundas's old home might be the means of bringing a noble revenge within your reach."

"You, Mrs. Dundas, a gentlewoman, educated, refined, gifted in no ordinary measure, would very quickly win the heart and the confidence of the invalid mistress of Huntingtower—in all likelihood the confidence and the sympathy of the obstinate old baronet himself. Woman's wit, you know, can compass wonders—particularly the wit of a clever woman."

"Yes—and then!" put in Ivy, faintly.

"And then," continued her companion steadily, "and then you can very easily reveal yourself and the truth to old Sir Roderick and his daughter Isobel, interceding with them for—winning forgiveness from them for—tossing out their husband."

"In time, and with tact, you may accomplish this, believe me. To you, I feel convinced, it would prove no impossible task. Ronald has—has treated you very basely; I admit it, Mrs. Dundas. Still, as I have already pointed out, would it not be a noble and Christian reprisal to win back for him—"

Ivy started up from the garden-seat under the elms with a passionate gesture of rebellion and dissent, her quivering hands locked tightly together.

"Not that," she cried wildly, when she could speak—"ah, not that! It would inevitably lead to our coming together again. Ronald would compel me to live with him—I know it! And

the old life, the old misery of it all, would begin for us over again!"

For some seconds, in silence, Keith Falconer sat there with his head bowed slightly. He did not raise it to look at Ivy when he said,—

"Perhaps—who can tell! Ronald Dundas might become a different man; himself once more; the man he was, say, in the days when you married him—if once he were to learn that all was pardoned at Huntingtower. To know that he was restored to his grandfather's favour, that his future was again as safe as it seemed to him in the time of his careless youth—all this, Mrs. Dundas, would cast for him a very different hue over life and life's possibilities. He is reckless now; he would be—"

"The man who married me was not the real Ronald Dundas," Ivy interrupted gloomily. "The real man, the true Ronald, has revealed himself—since. I never wish to see him again; and voluntarily I never will."

"You are husband and wife, all the same," Keith Falconer said.

But still his brave clear eyes were turned from Ivy; he did not look up.

"You need not remind me of the fact," Ivy answered passionately.

"I fancy," Keith said, as if pondering well the question—"indeed I am sure of it—that Ronald's gratitude would in no wise be insincere, should you consent to render him this great service I propose—I mean, of winning back for him his lost birthright. For justly it is his birthright. He was reared in the belief that Huntingtower and all belonging to it would one day be his own."

"I do not want his gratitude," she replied doggedly. "If he has forfeited this birthright of his, as he seems to have done, he deserves to lose it. Let it go!"

Keith checked a sigh; roused himself; and, turning suddenly to Ivy, said, in the old prompt, kindly way,—

"You will go to Huntingtower, Mrs. Dundas, will you not?"

"I—I do not know. One cannot decide such a thing in a hurry. It wants thinking over—a very great deal of thinking over," faltered she then.

For the third or fourth time Mr. Falconer looked at his watch.

"In ten minutes I must say good-bye. I will give you ten minutes in which to make up your mind."

Making this announcement, he sprang to his feet; and stood there confronting Ivy Dundas.

"Surely you can know your own mind in ten minutes!" he smiled.

"Mr. Falconer," she began hurriedly, "which—would you yourself have me do? Tell me."

"Why should you ask when you know so well?" he replied gravely.

And with that he strolled away and left her to her own reflections, his fair head a little bent, his hands behind his back, to a path hard by overshadowed by the great old elms.

Ivy sank back upon the rough garden seat, and pressed her face into her hands.

Her thoughts and emotions, in a singular tumult, were warring all together.

What ought she to do? How ought she to decide? Which was the right road—which was the wrong? Which course in the end would yield her the absolute calm and content for which her fainting soul so passionately hungered?

The given ten minutes were flown. Back to Ivy Dundas came Keith Falconer for his answer.

He held out his hand.

Her own was chill and unsteady as it lay shut for a moment within Keith's strong, warm, white one. He said cheerily and confidently,—

"You will go, then, after all, to Huntingtower? We have settled it so, have we not?"

"I—I want to do what is right—to—to please you, in fact. I cannot bear to think that—that you should be vexed with, disappointed in me. You have been so—so very good to me all through," was Ivy's broken piteous whisper in reply.

"Hush—please!" said he hastily. "Mrs.

Dundas," went on Keith in lighter accents, "do you know, you have lifted a really serious weight from my mind! Without your help and consent in the matter, where on earth, I wonder, should I have discovered the *rara avis*, the admirable nurse-companion, whose appearance at Huntingtower my kinswoman, Isobel Falconer, is just now awaiting so anxiously! Thank you a hundred times. I do not think that you will ever regret your good decision of this morning."

"Stay—one moment," she cried, withdrawing her hand nervously from his clasp. "I discern so many difficulties ahead. Things cannot be hurried along in this reckless fashion. For instance, there is my name—Ivy Dundas! How am I to enter boldly my husband's old home, in—in my own name, which is Ronald's! It is an impossibility!" exclaimed Ivy, blankly. "And, indeed, there are other awkwardnesses, other difficulties and uncertainties in the undertaking. I foresee so many!"

"Take my word for it, they will all of them vanish," replied Keith Falconer gravely, "before the force of careful thinking out and cheerful, determined operation. We must write to each other about the matter, and we shall soon see a way clear before us. By this evening's post I shall gladden the heart of Isobel Falconer by telling her that I have found her future companion and friend in the household of the Countess of Exe, who will serve as an admirable reference. And now it will be a rush for it or I shall lose my train. Good-bye, Mrs. Dundas!"

Nevertheless, at parting, Ivy exclaimed, with a flash of the old obstinacy and rebellion,—

"No matter in what direction—whether as sick nurse or as intercessor—I may ultimately succeed in my mission to Huntingtower, it will make no difference to me and Ronald. We are nothing to each other; and we can never be anything to each other again. Should he, ever again, at any time, enter the house which you say should by rights be his home, at that same moment do I quit it. Whatever may happen in this business, Ronald will continue to go his way—I to go mine. Mr. Falconer, please understand that."

"We can only trust to the future," Keith replied. "Once more good-bye."

He raised his hat finally, and was gone.

Well, thought Ivy, not without a certain fear and shivering at the heart, it was Keith Falconer's plot, his risky inspiration—not hers.

She was in his hands.

If evil or catastrophe should ensue of the venture, he, and not she, must take the blame of it.

After all, reflected Ivy wistfully, would it not be the better, the safer, the altogether wiser course, to immerse herself from the world within St. Marcella's stony convent walls?

The world, even at gloomy, silent, and forsaken Huntingtower, might be full of pitfalls—unimagined now.

Worse off than "a stranger in a strange land" would Ivy find herself in the home of the Dundases!

But she had given her word to Keith Falconer. She could not draw back now.

The future seemed threatening and very dark! How would it all end?

Ivy wondered—and sighed.

(To be continued.)

STRANGERS in China have great difficulty when meeting a funeral or wedding procession in the street to distinguish one from the other. The same red cloth coolies, carrying roasted pig and other dainties, appear in the procession, the same smaller coolies carrying cheap paper ornaments, and both are conducted with the same noise. The crowd at the funeral is as noisy as at a wedding, and the guests eat just as much. The only difference, indeed, between the two is that in the centre of one the bride is carried in an inclosed sedan chair, borne on the shoulders of some men, and followed by her bridesmaids. In that of the other the coffin is carried and the mourners follow.

A SISTER'S REVENGE.

—10—

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE announcement of Mrs. Field's sudden and unexpected death caused great excitement and consternation the next morning at Glendale.

"Oh, dear!" cried Myra, "how provokingly unfortunate for her to die just now! Why couldn't she have waited until after our birthday party! Of course Duncan wouldn't be expected to come now; and this whole matter was arranged especially for him; and my beautiful lilac silk is all made, and so bewitchingly lovely, too!"

"What can't be cured must be endured, you know," said Blanche; "and now the best thing to be done is to send a note of condolence to him, extending our deepest sympathy, and offering him any assistance in our power, and be sure to add: 'We would be very pleased to have Molly come over here until you can make other arrangements for her.'"

"Have Molly here!" flashed Myra, angrily. "I actually think you have gone crazy!"

"Well, there is certainly a method in my madness," remarked Blanche. "Aren't you quick-witted enough to understand that would be a sure way of bringing Duncan over here every day!—he would come to see his sister—and that is quite a point gained."

"You are rather clever, Blanche; I never thought of that."

And straightaway the perfumed little note was despatched, bearing Myra's monogram and tender-voiced sympathy to the handsome young heir, who sat all alone in that darkened chamber, wondering why Heaven had been so unkind to him.

An hour later Blanche and Myra were in the library arranging some new volumes on the shelves. Mrs. Bronson sat in a large easy-chair superintending the affair, while Madge stood at an open window, holding in her restless fingers the book from which she had been reading aloud, her blue eyes gazing earnestly on the distant curling smoke that rose up lazily from the chimneys of Duncan's home, and upon the brilliant sunshine that lighted up the eastern windows with a blaze of glory—as if there was no such thing as death or sorrow within those palatial walls—when Duncan's answer was received.

"It is from Duncan!" cried Myra, all in a flutter. "Shall I read it aloud, mamma?" she asked, glancing furtively at Madge, who stood at the window, her pale, death-like face half buried in the lace curtains.

"It is certainly not a personal letter," said Blanche, maliciously glancing at the superscription. "Don't you see it is addressed to 'Mrs. Bronson and daughters!'"

"At a time like this people don't think much of letters," commented Mrs. Bronson, apologetically. "Read the letter aloud, of course, my dear."

It read,—

"DEAR LADIES,—

"I thank you more than I can express for your kind sympathy in my present sad bereavement. I would gladly have accepted your offer of bringing my dear little orphan sister to you, had I not received a telegram this morning from Miss Lena Stanton, of Stanton Hall, announcing her intention of coming on at once, accompanied by Mrs. Martin, to take charge of little Molly."

"Again thanking you for the courtesy and kindness shown me, I am

"Yours very truly,

"DUNCAN FIELD."

There was a low, piteous cry, and the little figure at the window slipped down among the soft, billowy curtains in a deadly swoon; but the three so deeply engrossed in discussing the contents of the note did not notice it.

At last Madge opened her eyes, and they were dazed with pain. She could hear them coupling

the names of Duncan and Lena Stanton. Duncan—her husband!

Madge was blind and stupefied. She groped rather than walked from the library—away from the three, who scarcely noticed her absence.

Who cared that her heart was broken! Who cared that the cruel stab had gone home to her tender, bleeding heart; that the sweet young face was whiter than the petals of the harebells tossing their plumes against the casement!

Slowly, blindly, with one hand grasping the balusters, she went up the broad staircase to her own room.

She tried to think of everything on the way except the one thing that had taken place.

She thought of a story she had read, of a girl who was slain by having a dagger plunged into her breast. The girl ran a short distance, and when the dagger was drawn from the wound she fell down dead.

In some way she fancied she was like that girl—that, when she should reach her own room, and stand face to face with her own pain, she should drop down dead.

The door was closed, and she stood motionless, trying to understand and realize what she had heard.

"Have my senses deceived me?" She said the words over and over to herself. "Did I dream it? Can it even be possible Lena Stanton is coming here—coming to the home where I should have been! Heaven help me! Coming to comfort Duncan—my husband!"

She could fancy the darkly beautiful face bending over him; her white jewelled hands upon his shoulders, or, perhaps, smoothing back the bonny brown clustering curls from his white brow.

"My place should have been by his side," she continued.

It hurt and pained her to hear the name of the man she loved dearer than life coupled with the name of Lena Stanton.

"Oh, Duncan, my love, my love!" she cried out, "I can not bear it any longer! The sun of my life has gone down in gloom and sorrow. Oh, Duncan, my husband, I have not the strength nor the courage to bear it! I am a coward, I can not give you up. We are living apart, yet in the sight of Heaven I am your wife!"

Suddenly the solemn bells from Duncan's home commenced tolling, and through the leafy branches of the trees she caught a glimpse of a white face and bowed head—of a proud, cold face bending crouching over it, just as she had pictured it in her imagination.

Dear Heaven! it was Duncan and Lena!

She did not moan, she did not cry out, nor even utter a sigh. Like one turned to marble, she, the poor little misguided child-wife, stood watching them with an intenseness almost verging into madness.

She saw him lift his head wearily from his white hands, rise slowly, and then, side by side, both disappeared from the window.

After that Madge never knew how the moments passed.

She remembered the tidy little waiting-maid coming to her and asking if she would please come down to tea. She shook her head, but no sound issued from the white lips, and the maid went softly away, closing the door behind her.

Slowly the sun sank in the west in a great red ball of fire. The light died out of the sky, and the song-birds trilled their plaintive good-night songs in the soft gloaming.

Still Madge sat with her hands crossed in her lap, gazing intently at the window where she had seen Lena standing with Duncan, her husband.

A hand turned the knob of her door.

"Oh, dear me," cried Myra, "you are all in the dark; I do not see you. Are you here, Madge Meadows?"

"Yes," said Madge, controlling her voice by a violent effort. "Won't you sit down! I will light the gas."

"Oh, no, indeed!" cried Myra. "I came here to ask you if you would please sew a little of my ball-dress to-night. I can not use it just now; still, there is no need of putting it away half finished."

Sew a ball-dress while her heart was breaking! Oh, how could she do it!

Quietly she followed Myra to her pretty little blue and gold *boudoir*, making no remonstrance. She was to sew a ball-dress while the heiress of Stanton Hall was consoling her young husband in his bitter sorrow.

The shimmering billows of silk seemed swimming before her eyes, and the frost-work of seed pearls to waver through the blinding tears that would force themselves to her eyes.

Connie was not there. How pitifully lonely poor Madge felt! The face bent so patiently over the lilac silk had a strange story written upon it. But the two girls discussing the events of the day did not glance once in her direction; their thoughts and conversation were of the handsome young heiress and Duncan.

"For once in your life you were wrong," said Blanche. "The way affairs appear now does not look much like a broken-off marriage, I can assure you."

"Those who have seen her say she is peculiarly beautiful and fascinating, though cold, reserved, and as haughty as a queen," said Myra.

"Cold and reserved," sneered Blanche. "I guess you would not have thought so if you had been at the drawing-room window to-day and seen her bending so lovingly over Duncan. I declare, I expected every moment to see her kiss him."

The box which held the seed-pearls dropped to the floor with a crash, and white, glistening beads were scattered about in all directions.

"Why, what a careless creature you are, Madge Meadows!" cried Myra, in dismay. "Just see what you have done! Half of them will be lost, and what is not lost will be smashed, and I had just enough to finish that lily on the front breadth and twine some among the blossoms for my hair. What do you suppose I'm going to do now, you provoking girl? It is actually enough to make one cry."

"I am so sorry," sighed Madge, piteously.

"Sorry! Will that bring back my seed-pearls! I have half a mind to make mamma deduct the amount from your salary."

"You may have it all if it will only replace them," said Madge, earnestly. "I think, though, I have gathered them all."

A great, round tear rolled off from her long, silky eyelashes and into the very heart of the frosted lily over which she bent, but the lily's petals seemed to close about it, leaving no trace of its presence.

Blanche and Myra openly discussed their chagrin and keen disappointment, yet admitting what a handsome couple Duncan and Lena made—he so courteous and noble, she so royal and queenly.

"Of course we must call upon her if she is to be Duncan's wife," said Myra, spitefully. "I foresee she will be exceedingly popular."

"We must also invite her to Glendale," said Blanche, thoughtfully. "It is the least we can do, and it is expected of us. I quite forgot to mention one of their servants was telling John both Duncan and little Molly intend to accompany Miss Stanton back to Stanton Hall as soon after the funeral as matters can be arranged."

"Why, that is startling news indeed! Why, then, they will probably leave some time this week!" cried Myra.

"Most probably," said Blanche. "You ought certainly to send over your note this evening—it is early yet."

"There is no one to send," said Myra. "John has driven over to the village, and there is no one else to go."

"Perhaps Madge will go for you," suggested Blanche.

There was no need of being jealous now of Madge's beauty in that direction. Myra gladly availed herself of the suggestion.

"Madge," she said, turning abruptly to the quivering little figure whose face drooped over the lilac silk, "never mind finishing that dress to-night. I wish you to take a note over to the large grey-stone house yonder, and be sure to deliver it to Mr. Duncan Field himself."

CHAPTER XXV.

MYRA BRONSON never forgot the despairing cry that broke from Madge's white lips as she repeated her command,—

"I wish you to deliver this note to Mr. Duncan Field himself."

"Oh, Miss Myra," she cried, clasping her hands together in an agony of entreaty, "I cannot—oh, indeed I cannot! Ask anything of me but that, and I will gladly do it."

Both girls looked at her in sheer astonishment. "What is the reason you cannot?" cried Myra, in utter amazement. "I do not comprehend you."

"I—I cannot take the note," she said, in a frightened whisper. "I do not—I—"

She stopped short in utter confusion.

"I choose you shall do just as I bid you," replied Myra, in her imperious, scornful anger. "It really seems to me you forget your position here, Miss Meadows. How dare you refuse me!"

Opposition always strengthened Myra's decision, and she determined Madge should take her note to Duncan Field at all hazards.

The mute, eloquent appeal in the blue eyes raised to her own was utterly lost on her.

"The pride of these dependent companions is something ridiculous," she went on, angrily.

"You consider yourself too fine, I suppose, to be made a messenger of." Myra laughed a scornful, mocking laugh. "Pride and poverty do not go very well together. You may go to your room now and get your hat and shawl. I shall have the letter written in a few minutes. There will be no use appealing to mamma. You ought to know by this time we always overrule her objections."

It was too true. Mrs. Bronson never had much voice in a matter where Blanche or Myra was interested.

Like one in a dream, Madge turned from them. She never remembered how she gained her own room.

With cold, tremulous fingers she fastened her hat, tucking the bright golden hair carefully beneath her veil, and threw her shawl over her shoulders, just as Myra approached letter in hand.

"You need not go around by the main road," she said; "there is a much nearer path leading down to the stone wall. You need not wait for an answer; there will be none. The servants over there are awkward, blundering creatures—do not trust it to them—you must deliver it to Duncan himself."

"I make one last appeal to you, Miss Myra. Indeed, it is not pride that prompts me. I could not bear it. Have pity on me. You are gentle and kind to others; please, oh, please, be merciful to me!"

"I have nothing more to say upon the subject—I have said you are to go. You act as if I were sending you to some place where you might catch the scarlet fever or the mumps. You amuse me, upon my word you do. Duncan is not dangerous, neither is he a Bluebeard; his only fault is being alarmingly handsome. The best advice I can give you is, don't admire him too much. He should be labelled, 'Out of the market.'"

Myra tripped gaily from the room, her crimson satin ribbons fluttering after her, leaving a perceptible odour of violets in the room, while Madge clutched the note in her cold, nervous grasp, and walked like one in a dream through the bright patches of glittering moonlight, through the sweet-scented, rose-bordered path, on through the dark shadows of the trees toward the home of Duncan—her husband.

A soft, brooding silence lay over the sleeping earth as Madge, with a sinking heart, drew near the house. Her soft footfalls on the mossy earth made no sound.

Silently as a shadow she crept up to the blossom-covered porch. Some one was standing there, leaning against the very pillar round which she twined her arms as she watched Duncan's shadow on the roses.

The shifting moonbeams pierced the fleecy white clouds that enveloped them, and as he

turned his face toward her she saw it was Duncan. She could almost have reached out her hand and touched him from where she stood. She was sorely afraid her face or her voice might startle him if she spoke to him suddenly.

"I do not need to speak," she thought. "I will go up to him and lay the letter in his hand."

Then a great intense longing came over her to hear his voice and know that he was speaking to her. She had quite decided to pursue this course, when the rustle of a silken garment fell upon her ear. She knew the light tread of the slippered feet but too well—it was Lena. She went up to him in her usual caressing fashion and laid her white hand on his arm.

"Do you know you have been standing here quite two hours, Duncan, watching the shadows of the vine-leaves? I have longed to come up and ask you what interest those dancing shadows had for you, but I could not make up my mind to disturb you. I often fancy you do not know how much time you spend in thought."

Lena was wondering if he was thinking of that foolish, romantic fancy that had come so near separating them—his boyish fancy for Madge Meadows, the over-seer's niece. No, surely not. He must have forgotten her long ago.

"These reveries seem to have grown into a habit with me," he said, dreamily; "almost a second nature of late. If you were to come and talk to me at such times you would break me of it."

The idea pleased her. A bright flush rose to her face, and she made some laughing reply, and he looked down upon her with a kindly smile.

Oh! the torture of it to the poor young wife standing watching them, with heart on fire in the deep shadow of the crimson-hearted passion-flowers that quivered on the intervening vines.

The letter she held in her hand slipped all unheeded from her fingers into the bushes. She had but one thought—she must get away. The very air seemed to stifle her; her heart seemed numb—an icy band seemed pressing round it, and her poor forehead was burning hot.

It did not matter much where she went—nobody loved her, nobody cared for her. As softly as she came, she glided down the path that led to the entrance gate. She passed through the moonlit grounds, where the music and fragrance of the summer night were at their height. The night wind stirred the pink clover and the blue-bells beneath her feet. Her eyes were hot and dry; tears would have been a world of relief to her, but none came to her parched eyelids.

She paid little heed to the direction she took. One idea alone took possession of her—she must get away.

"If I could only go back to dear Uncle George!" she sighed. "His love has never failed me."

It seemed long years ago since she had romped with him, a happy, merry child, over the cotton-fields; and he had called her his little Madge during all those years when no one lived at Stanton Hall and the wild ivy climbed riotously over the windows and doors. Even Anne's rasping voice would sound sweet to her now. She would live over again those happy childish days if she only could. She remembered how Anne would send her to the brook for water, and how she sprinkled every flower in the pathway; and how Anne would scold her when she returned with her bucket but half full; and how she had loved to dream away those sunny summer days, lying under the cool, shady trees, listening to the songs the robins sung as they glanced down at her with their sparkling little eyes.

How she had dreamed of the gallant young hero who was to come to her some day. She had wondered how she would know him, and what were the words he first would say.

A weary smile flitted over her face as she remembered when she went to the brook she had always put on her prettiest blue ribbon, in case she might meet her hero.

Oh, those sweet, bright, rosy dreams of girlhood! What a pity it is they do not last forever.

Those girlish dreams where glowing fancy

reigns supreme, and the prosaic future is all unknown.

She remembered her meeting with Duncan; how every nerve in her whole being thrilled, and how she had felt her cheeks grow flaming hot, just as she had read they would do when she met the right one.

That was how she had known Duncan was the right one when she had shyly glanced up from under her long eye-lashes into the brown hazel eyes fixed upon her so quizzically as he took the heavy basket from her slender arms that never-to-be-forgotten June day beneath the blossoming trees.

Poor child, her life had been a sad romance since then. How strange it was she was fleeing from the young husband whom she had married and was so quickly parted from.

All this trouble had come about because she had so courageously rescued her letter from Madame Christine.

"If he had not boud me to secrecy I could have cried out before the whole world I was his wife," she thought.

A burning flush rose to her face as she thought how cruelly he had suspected her, his poor little child-bride who had never known one wrong or sinful thought in her pure, innocent young life.

If he had only given her the chance of explaining how she had happened to be there with Vincent Dalrymple.

If they had taken her back she must have confessed about the letter, and who Duncan was and what he was to her.

Even Dalrymple's persecution found an excuse in her innocent, unsuspecting little heart.

"He sought to save me from being taken back when he called me his wife," she thought. "He believed I was free to woo and win, because I dared not tell him I was Duncan's wife."

Yet the thought of Dalrymple always brought a shudder to her pure young mind. She could not understand why he would have resorted to such desperate means to gain an unwilling bride.

Not yet seventeen. Ah, what a sad love story hers had been. How cruelly love's young dream had been blighted, she told herself; and yet she would not have exchanged that one thrilling, ecstatic moment of rapture when Duncan had clasped her in his arms and whispered—"My darling wife," for a whole life-time of calm happiness with anyone else.

On and on she walked through the violet-studded grass, thinking—thinking. Strange fancies came thronging to her overwrought brain.

She pushed her veil back from her face and leaned against the trunk of a tree; her brain was dizzy, and her thoughts were confused.

The very stars seemed dancing riotously in the blue sky above her, and the branches of the trees were whispering strange fancies.

Suddenly a horseman, riding a coal-black charger came cantering swiftly up the long avenue of trees.

He saw the quiet figure standing leaning against the branches.

"I will inquire the way," he said to himself, drawing rein beside her. "Can you tell me, madame, if this is the most direct road leading to Glendale? I am looking for a hostelry near it. I seem to have lost my way. Will you kindly direct me to the home of Mr. Duncan Field?"

The voice sounded strangely familiar to Madge. She was dimly conscious someone was speaking to her.

She raised her face and gazed at the speaker. The cold, pale moonlight fell full upon it, clearly revealing its strange unearthly whiteness, and the bright, flashing eyes, gazing dreamily past the terror-stricken man looking down on her with white, livid lips, and blanched horror-stricken face.

His eyes almost leaped from their sockets in abject terror, as Vincent Dalrymple gazed on the upturned face by the roadside.

"Good Heavens, do I dream?" he cried, clutching at the pommel of his saddle. "Is this the face of Madge Meadows, or is it a spectre,

unable to sleep in the depths of her tomb, come back to haunt me for driving her to her doom?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

DUNCAN and Lena talked for some time out in the moonlight, then Duncan excused himself, and on the plea of having important business letters to write retired to the library.

For some minutes Lena leaned thoughtfully against the railing. The night was still and clear; the moon hung over the dark trees; floods of silvery light bathed the waters of the glittering sea, the sleeping flowers and the grass.

"I shall always love this fair home," she thought, a bright light creeping into her dark, dazzling eyes. "I am Fortune's favourite," she said, slowly. "I shall have the one great prize I covet most on earth. I shall win Duncan at last. I wonder at the change in him. There was a time when I believed he loved me. Could it be handsome, refined, courteous Duncan had more than a passing fancy for Madge Meadows—simple, unpretentious Madge Meadows! Thank Heaven she is dead!" she cried, vehemently. "I would have perilled my very soul to have won him."

Even as the thought shaped itself in her mind a dark form stepped cautiously forward.

She was not startled; a passing wonder as to who it might be struck her. She did not think much about it; a shadow in the moonlight did not frighten her.

"Lena!" called a low, cautious voice, "come down into the garden; I must speak with you. It is I, Vincent Dalrymple."

In a single instant the soft love-light had faded from her face, leaving it cold, proud, and pitiless. A vague, nameless dread seized her. She was a courageous girl; she would not let him know it.

"The mad fool!" she cried, clenching her white jewelled hands together. "Why does he follow me here! What shall I do? I must buy him off at any cost. I dare not defy him. Better temporize with him."

She muttered the words aloud, and she was shocked to see how changed and hoarse her own voice sounded.

"Women have faced greater peril than this," she muttered, "and cleverly outwitted ingenious foes. I must win by stratagem."

She quickly followed the tall figure down the path that divided the little garden from the shrubbery.

"I knew you would not refuse me, Lena," he said, clasping her hands and kissing her cold lips. He noticed the glance she gave him had nothing in it but coldness and annoyance.

"You did not tell me you are pleased to see me, Lena, and yet you have promised to be my wife."

She stood perfectly still leaning against an oleander-tree.

"Why don't you speak to me, Lena?" he cried. "By Heaven; I am almost beginning to distrust you. You remember your promise," he said, hurriedly—"if I removed the farmer's niece from your path, you were to reward me with your heart and hand."

She would have interrupted him, but he silenced her with a gesture.

"You said your love for Duncan had turned to bitter hatred. You found he loved the girl, and that would be a glorious revenge. I did not have to resort to abducting her from the seminary, as we had planned. The bird flew into my grasp. I would have placed her in the asylum you selected, but she eluded me by leaping into the pit. I have been haunted by her face night and day ever since. I see her face in crowds; in the depths of the silent forest her spectre appears before me, until I fly from it like one accursed."

She could not stay the passionate torrent of his words.

"Vincent, this is all a mistake," she said; "you have not given me a chance to speak." Her hands dropped nervously by her side. There were fierce rebellious thoughts in her heart, but she dare not give them utterance.

"What have I done to deserve all this!" she

asked, trying to assume a tender tone she was far from feeling.

"What have you done?" he cried hoarsely. "Why I left you at Stanton Hall, feeling secure in the belief that I had won you. Returning suddenly and unexpectedly, I found you had gone to the home of Duncan Field. Do you know what I would have done, Lena, if I had found you his wife and false to your trust?"

"You forget yourself, Vincent," she said; "gentlemen never threaten women."

He bit his lip angrily.

"There are extreme cases of desperation," he made reply. "You must keep your promise," he said determinedly. "No other man must dare speak to you of love."

She saw the angry light flaming in his eyes, and trembled under her studied composure; yet not the quiver of an eyelid betrayed her emotion. She had not meant to quarrel with him; for once in her life she forgot her prudence.

"Suppose that, by the exercise of any power you think you possess, you could really compel me to be your wife, do you think it would benefit you? I should learn to despise you. What would you gain by it?"

The answer sprang quickly to his lips: "The one great point for which I am striving—possession of Stanton Hall;" but he was too diplomatic to utter the words. She saw a lurid light in his eyes.

"You shall be my wife," he said, gloomily. "If you have been cherishing any hope of winning Duncan Field, abandon it at once. As a last resort, I will explain to him how cleverly you removed from his path the pretty little girl he loved."

"You dare not!" she cried, white to the very lips. "You have forgotten your own share in that little affair. Who would believe you acted upon a woman's bidding? You would soon be called to account for it. You forgot that little circumstance, Vincent; you dare not go to Duncan!"

He knew what she said was perfectly true. He had not intended to do so to Duncan; he knew it would be as much as his life was worth to encounter him. He was aware his name had been coupled with Madge's in the journals which had described her tragic death. He knew Duncan had fallen madly, desperately in love with little Madge Meadows, but he did not dream he had made her his wife.

"You have not given me time to explain why I am here," she said.

"I have heard all about it," he answered, impatiently, "but I do not understand why they sent for you."

"Mrs. Field requested it," she replied quietly. "Duncan simply obeyed her wishes."

"Perhaps she looked upon you as her future daughter-in-law," sneered Vincent. "I have followed you to Scotland to prevent it; I would follow you to the ends of the earth to prevent it! A promise to me can not be lightly broken."

Not a feature of that proud face quivered to betray the sharp spasm of fear that darted through her heart.

"You should have waited until you had cause to reproach me, Vincent," she said, drawing her wrap closer about her and shivering as if with cold. "I must go back to the house now; someone might miss me."

He made no reply. The wind bent the reeds, and the waves of the sea dashed up on the distant beach with a long, low wash. He was wondering how far she was to be trusted.

"You may have perfect confidence in me, Vincent," she said. "My word ought to be sufficient," as if quite divining his thoughts. "You need have no fear; I will be true to you."

"I shall remain away until this affair has blown over," he replied. "I can live as well in one part of the country as another, thanks to the income my father left me." He laid great stress on the last sentence; he wanted to impress her with the fact that he had plenty of money. "She must never know," he told himself, "that I have so recklessly squandered the vast inheritance that has been left me, and that I am standing on the verge of ruin." A marriage with the wealthy heiress would save him at the eleventh

hour. "I will trust you, Lena," he continued. "I know you will keep your vow."

The false ring of candor did not deceive her; she knew it would be a case of diamond cut diamond.

"That is spoken like your own generous self, Vincent," she said softly, clasping his hands in her own white jewelled ones. "You pained me by your distrust."

He saw she was anxious to get away from him, and he bit his lip with vexation. Her pretty coaxing manner did not deceive him one whit, yet he clasped his arms in a very lover-like fashion around her, as he replied:

"Forget that it ever existed, my darling. Where there is such ardent, passionate love, there is always more or less jealousy and fear. Do you realize I am making an alien of myself for your sweet sake? I could never refuse you a request. Your slightest wish has been my law. Be kind to me, Lena."

She did try to be more agreeable and fascinating.

"I must remove all doubts from his mind," she thought. "I shall probably be Duncan's wife when we meet again. Then his threats will be useless; I will scornfully deny it. He has no proofs."

She talked to him so gracefully, so tenderly at times, he was almost tempted to believe she actually cared for him more than she would admit.

Still, he allowed, it would do no harm to keep a strict watch on her movements.

"Good-bye, Lena, dearest," he said. "I shall keep you constantly advised of my whereabouts. As soon as matters can be arranged satisfactorily I am coming back to claim you."

Another moment and she was alone, walking slowly back to the house, a very torrent of anger in her proud, defiant heart.

"I must hurry matters up; delays are dangerous," she thought, walking slowly up the broad path towards the house.

Slowly the long hours of the night dragged themselves by, yet Madge did not return to Glendale.

The hours lengthened into days, the days into weeks, and still there was no trace of her to be found. Myra's explanation readily accounted for her absence.

"She preferred to leave us rather than deliver my note," she said, angrily; "and I, for one, am not sorry she has gone."

"Duncan did not mention having received it," said Blanche, when he came with Molly to bid us good-bye.

"She probably read it and destroyed it," said Myra. "Well, there was was nothing in it very particular. Towards the last of it I mentioned I would send the note over by Madge Meadows, my mother's companion. More than likely she took umbrage at that."

"That was a very unkind remark," asserted Connie. "You had no business to mention it at all; it was uncalled for."

"Well, she would not have known it if she had not read it," replied Myra. "You must admit that."

Mrs. Bronson felt sorely troubled. In the short time Madge had been with her she had put unlimited confidence in her.

No one thought of searching for her; they all accepted the facts as the case presented itself to them.

Madge had certainly left them of her own free will.

Connie alone felt distressed.

"I know everything looks that way, but I shall never believe it," she cried.

She remembered the conversation she had so lately had with Madge. How she had clasped her loving little arms about her neck, crying out,—

"Pray for me, Connie. I am sorely tried. My feet are on the edge of a precipice. No matter what I may be tempted to do, do not lose faith in me, Connie; always believe in me."

Poor little Madge! What was the secret sorrow that was goading her on to madness? Would she ever know?

Where was she now? Ah, who could tell?

A curious change seemed to come over romping, mischievous Connie; she had grown silent and thoughtful.

"I could never believe anyone in this world was true or pure again if I thought for one moment deceit lay brooding in a face so fair as little Madge Meadows."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE months flew quickly by; the cold winter had slipped away, and the bright green grass and early violets were sprinkling the distant hill-slopes. The crimson-breasted robins were singing in the budding branches of the trees, and all Nature reminded one the glorious spring had come.

Luncan Field stood upon the porch of Stanton Hall gazing up at the fleecy white clouds that scudded over the blue sky, lost in deep thought.

He was the same handsome, debonaire Duncan, but ah, how changed! The merry, laughing brown eyes looked silent and grave enough now, and the lips the drooping brown moustache covered rarely smiled. Even his voice seemed to have a deeper tone.

He had done the one thing that morning which his mother had asked him to do with her dying breath—he had asked Lena Stanton to be his wife.

The torture of the task seemed to grow upon him as the weeks rolled by, and in desperation he told himself he must settle the matter at once or he would not have the strength to do it.

He never once thought what he should do after he had married her.

He tried to summon up courage to tell her the story of his marriage, that his hopes, his heart, and his love all lay in the grave of his young wife.

Poor Duncan, he could not lay bare that sweet, sad secret; he could not have borne her questions, her wonder, her remarks, and have lived; his dead love was far too sacred for that; he could not take the treasured love story from his heart and hold it up to public gaze. It would have been easier for him to tear the living, beating heart from his breast than to do that.

He had walked into the library that morning, where he knew he should find Lena. She was standing before the fire. Although it was early spring the mornings were chilly, and a cheerful fire burned in the grate, and threw a bright, glowing radiance over the room and the exquisite morning toilet of white cashmere, with its white lace frills, relieved here and there with coquettish dashes of scarlet blossoms, which Lena wore, setting off her graceful figure to such queenly advantage.

Duncan looked at her, at the imperious beauty any man might have been proud to win, secretly hoping she would refuse him.

"Good-morning, Duncan," she said, holding out her white hand to him. "I am glad you have come to talk to me. I was watching you walking up and down under the trees, and you looked so lonely I made up my mind to join you."

A lovely colour was deepening in her cheeks, and her eyes drooped shyly. He broke right into the subject at once while he had the courage to do it.

"I have something to say to you, Lena," he began, leading her to an adjacent sofa and seating himself beside her. "I want to ask you if you will be my wife." He looked perhaps the more confused of the two. "I will do my best to make you happy," he continued. "I cannot say that I will make a model husband, but I will say that I shall do my best."

There was a minute's silence, awkward enough for both.

"You have asked me to be your wife, Duncan, but you have not said one word of loving me."

The remark was so unexpected Duncan seemed for a few moments to be unable to reply to it. Looking at the eager, expectant face turned toward him, it appeared ungenerous and unkind not to give her one affectionate word. Yet he

did not know how to say it; he had never spoken a loving word to any one except Madge, his fair little child-bride.

He tried hard to put the memory of Madge away from him as he answered,—

"The question is so important that most probably I have thought more of it than of any words which shall go with it."

"Oh, that is it!" returned Lena, with a wistful little laugh. "Most men, when they ask women to marry them, say something of love, do they not?"

"Yes," he replied, absently.

"You have had no experience," laughed Lena, archly.

She was sorely disappointed. She had gone over in her own imagination this very scene a thousand times—the supreme moment when he would clasp his arms around her and tell her in glowing, passionate words how dearly he loved her, and how wretched his life would be without her. He did nothing of the kind.

Duncan was thinking he would have given anything to have been able to make love to her—anything for the power of saying tender words—she looked so loving.

Her dark, beautiful face was so near him, and her graceful figure so close, that he could have wound his arm around her; but he did not. In spite of every resolve, he thought of Madge the whole time. How different that other love-making had been! How his heart throbbed, how every endearing name he could think of trembled on his lips as he strained Madge to his heart when she had bashfully consented to be his wife!

That love-making was real substance; this one only the shadow of love.

"You have not answered my question, Lena. Will you be my wife?"

Lena raised her dark, beautiful face, radiant with the light of love, to his.

"If I consent, will you promise to love me better than anything else or any one else in the wide world?"

"I will devote my whole life to you, study your every wish," he answered, eagerly.

How was she to know he had given his heart to Madge?

She held out her hands to him with a charming gesture of affection. He took them and kissed them; he could do neither more nor less.

"I will be your wife, Duncan," she said, with a tremulous, wistful sigh.

"Thank you, Lena," he returned, gently, bending down and kissing the beautiful crimson lips; "you shall never regret it. You are so good and kind, I am going to impose on your good nature. You have promised me you will be my wife—when may I claim you, Lena?"

"Do you wish it to be soon?" she asked, hesitatingly, wondering how he would answer her.

"Yes," he said, absently; "the sooner it is over the better I shall be pleased."

She looked up into his face at a loss to interpret the words.

"You shall name the day, Duncan," she replied.

"I have your father's consent that it may take place just as soon as possible, in case you promised to marry me," he said. "Suppose it takes place in a fortnight, say—will that be too soon for you?"

Lena gave a little scream of surprise.

"As soon as that!" she murmured; but ended by readily consenting.

He thanked her and kissed her once more. After a few quiet words they parted—she happy in the glamour of her love-dream; he praying to Heaven from the depths of his miserable heart to give him strength to carry out the rash vow which had been wrung from his unwilling lips.

In his heart Duncan knew no one but Madge could ever reign. Dead, he was devoted to her memory.

His life was narrowing down. He was all kindness, consideration, and devotion; but the one supreme magnet of all—love—was wanting.

(To be continued.)

JOHN STAUNTON'S WIFE.

—101—

(Continued from page 56.)

"With—with Gaston De Lauray!" at length she gasped. "Oh! John, be calm and listen—"

"Listen!" he echoed like a maniac, hurling her so roughly from him that she stumbled and almost fell. "Woman! this, then, is how you keep your promise! Remember, I—I trusted her to you! I believed that you would guard her as jealously as your own life!"

"And I—oh! John, be just, be merciful!—Heaven knows I did my best!"

And with these broken words she fell on her knees. Endurance suddenly deserted her; she covered her white face with both cold, trembling hands, and sobbed as though her heart must surely break.

Alas, poor Josephine! Alas, poor John! 'Twas indeed, a sad home-coming.

CHAPTER VI.

REFLECTION during his brief journey up to town decided Sir Archibald to proceed at once to the Alexandra Hotel.

His supposition that Gaston De Lauray would be found at his rooms proved but too correct, although it was not without considerable difficulty that the baronet succeeded in gaining admission to his friend's presence, or in other words, in forcing his way to the familiar suite of rooms, despite the remonstrances of the Frenchman's valet, who protested finally (with true Hibernian emphasis) that "his master was not at home, indeed he *wasn't* to anyone but a lady! So would Sir Archibald just be good enough to understand plain English once for all, else there'd be a deuce of a row, he could tell him, of which he'd have to bear the brunt!"

And Sir Archibald finally demonstrated his comprehension of the vernacular by making his way upstairs in spite of Cerberus, and unceremoniously bursting in upon Gaston unannounced.

"Knew I'd find you here, dear boy, although your fellow swore point-blank that you were out!" the baronet began, wringing his friend's hand, although De Lauray made no attempt to rise from before his escritoire, nor did he ask his visitor to take a seat. "Halloa!" glancing round, and taking note of the travelling impedimenta with which the room was strewn. "Gladstone bag, rug, hat-box! Where on earth are you off to? Anything in the wind?"

De Lauray essayed a yawn, but failed signally in the attempt; still he stretched himself with a languid air, and answered with as much indifference as he could command,—

"Nothing much. I've had intelligence from Paris which will take me over for a day or two. I hope to catch the tidal train, by the way, and so—as I've an appointment presently—you won't mind my suggesting, my dear boy, that you should say what you have to say at once, and then be so obliging as to take yourself off—sharp!"

"Ha! just so. Certainly, of course!" returned Sir Archibald, flinging himself into the depths of a luxurious armchair even as he spoke, and producing a cigarette case as he glanced about for a match. "It's not five o'clock yet, don't you know, so you have heaps of time. Boat can't possibly start before midnight: train goes, I think, a quarter before nine!"

"You're very much mistaken. I shall be off from here in less than an hour. And, moreover, I've an appointment, as I think I told you between this and then. As a gentleman, you will understand me; I need say no more, I'm sure!"

De Lauray's embarrassment and preoccupation were obvious; during the course of this brief dialogue he was engaged in opening and locking drawers, stuffing papers into his travelling bag, tearing up letters, scribbling notes, filling

up cheques to settle an array of "little accounts" spread open before him on his desk; and ever and again he glanced nervously at the clock. He was pale as ashes, and it appeared to Sir Archibald that his long, thin hand shook slightly as he grasped the slender quill.

Truth to tell, the baronet, for his own part, was becoming painfully anxious now. He glanced furtively towards the timepiece upon the mantel, and began to wonder uneasily "why the deuce the thing hung fire so!—if his little ruse should fail to come off properly, after all!"—but this was a contingency involving issues too momentous to be calmly contemplated even for a moment; so Sir Archibald endeavoured to banish the notion of any such possibility, and began to exercise his ingenuity in a vain attempt to invent some plausible pretext which should enable him to persist in lingering in his friend's rooms, despite De Lauray's polite intimation that, "as a gentleman," he would do well to clear out!

He was so far driven "on to his beam-ends," however, as he himself would have expressed it, that he had risen to his feet, and—arranging his moustache the while with elaborate care—began explaining, that "perhaps after all—don't you know! as—er! Gaston appeared pressed for time—in a terrible hurry, in fact; and he—well he himself had no end of a lot to say (little difficulty, respecting which he had desired the benefit of De Lauray's advice). Perhaps, after all, it would be better to defer a—a somewhat ticklish discussion, until—er! well, till Gaston got back again, as—well! he supposed he did mean to return some time, eh! Not decamping for good and all—or bad and all, old fellow, eh!"

To this point-blank question, however, Gaston De Lauray returned a somewhat ambiguous reply. He had every hope of meeting his friend soon again, though at present it was quite impossible to state definitely when he should be back again. Meanwhile any communication with which Sir Archibald might favour him, addressed "Poste Restante, Paris," would reach him in due course, and receive his best and prompt attention. If any little pecuniary matter troubled Sir Archie's peace, he—De Lauray—could only say his cheque-book was unreservedly at the service of his friend; on this subject he might, perhaps, write him at his leisure, but at the present moment he would only beg—

The entrance of a waiter at this juncture, bearing a telegram upon a salver, summarily arrested further eloquence on Gaston's part.

He snatched the ominous missive with a trembling hand, and as Sir Archibald furtively scrutinised the expression of his friend's face as he hastily scanned the pencilled lines, a twinkle of amusement one moment glistened in his own shrewd, good-natured eyes.

"Excuse me, *mon cher*! a matter of importance! No time for explanations—urgent business, and—I'm off! Help yourself from the liqueur stand, call for brandy and soda—what you will! Good-bye for the present; and touch the bell as you go out!"

And before Sir Archibald had time even to attempt to reply, Gaston De Lauray had seized his hat and hurried down the stairs; he had not forgotten, however, to thrust the telegram into the breast pocket of his coat, despite his unwonted precipitancy.

Then the baronet flung himself upon a couch and burst into a roar of laughter.

"Jove! though, this is no moment for merriment!" he assured himself, in reproving tones, as he rallied and ran his fingers through his hair, preparatory to "putting on his thinking cap" (as he murmured under his breath), "I wish him joy, poor devil, cooling his heels at Charing Cross! And now, what's the next move upon the board? Humph! to wait here, I suppose, until her arrival, and positively decline to leave the spot until, by fair means or foul, I succeed in carrying her off—by main force if necessary—back to Westlands this very night. Hang it all, I don't half relish the job. What on earth will she think of my interference! I'd be peppered—that I would—rather than get mixed up in an affair of this sort were it not for her sweet sake!"

The whole expression of the man's face changed

magically as the last reflection crossed his mind a smile played about the corners of his lips, a tender light gleamed one moment in his eyes.

"Poor Josephine!" he murmured, "she has had a difficult rôle to play; yet if she *will* but give me the chance, I will make her so happy in the future that before long she shall come even to remember the troubles of the past!"

As the last syllable died upon his lips he was conscious of approaching footsteps without.

"Heavens!" he muttered, "tis she, I fear—that is, I hope, for the sooner it's over the better; besides, each moment's delay renders his absence less secure."

The door was pushed ajar, and as stealthily closed again before she even glanced around—Vivien herself, none other—one hand held timorously before her eyes.

"Gaston!" she cried, brokenly, staggering towards the nearest chair, "they told me you were out; but I— Oh! Heavens!" she fairly screamed, as glancing up her eyes met those of—not the man she expected, but of Sir Archibald Hope, who advanced respectfully towards her.

"Yes, Mrs. Staunton, De Lauray, indeed is—absent. But I—I can be of service to you, perhaps, in his stead," he began, gravely. There was no mistaking the ominous solemnity of his tone; and the wretched wife turned sick and faint, realising that the hastily-laid plan had failed, and that she was in truth utterly undone. "In the first place, let me escort you immediately to the station. We can leave Victoria for Westlands at 5.55; and the sooner we get back the better, as I'm sure you will, after due reflection, agree with me. Your father is badly hurt, you must remember, and was calling loudly for his favourite daughter when I parted from Josephine!"

"Go back!" she wailed. "Ah! you little guess—"

"I do more than 'guess'—I *know* all!" he answered, in a low voice. "This is no moment for subterfuge, so forgive plain speaking—it is ever best. Come back with me at once, my dear Mrs. Staunton, I beseech you, and all will yet be well."

"No one need ever suspect your absence. We can profess to—to the servants, or any one else who may have seen you, that you left to meet your husband, took the wrong direction—anything—what you will—and that you missed him on the way. Only remember, every moment is of importance."

"Believe me, sooner or later, you will be very thankful that I alone am here just now, instead of Gaston De Lauray; and for Heaven's sake, let us get out of this at once!"

She had started to her feet, she was gazing wildly round; she flung her arms aloft like a hunted woman, with a low despairing moan.

"Go back!—I dare not! And, oh! where, oh! where can Gaston be! Surely he has not played me false! Surely—"

"Nay, Mrs. Staunton, in common justice to the absent, I cannot allow you to believe that. I alone am culpable on that count, for I—I contrived to get Gaston out of the way!"

"No, I do not ask your forgiveness now; I can wait for that! There will surely come a day—and that ere long—when you will thank me from the very bottom of your heart for all that I have ventured to take upon myself, not for your sake only, but for that, likewise, of—one other!"

"But we are wasting time whilst moments are most precious. Come, Mrs. Staunton, I beseech you, come at once! For every second wasted now you will later grieve a year!"

He caught her by the wrist, his voice and attitude were those of the most abject entreaty; but the wretched woman wrested herself from his grasp and flung herself into a low chair, wailing brokenly,—

"I dare not! Oh! I dare not face my husband! I am a guilty creature; and John may perhaps be home to-day!"

"Ah! I forgot to tell you that! As I dashed in a fly from the Rectory to the station I passed another cab rattling down towards Westlands, piled high with ponderous trunks and baggage—"

impediments, in short, which struck me as wearing a decidedly transatlantic air.

"There was a solitary passenger inside—your husband, probably—for I asked and heard at the station that the Liverpool afternoon express was just in. He may be watching for your return even now at Westlands. Oh, Mrs. Staunton, come!"

But her sole response was a piteous moan; she covered her face with both her hands, rocking herself slowly backwards and forwards in a perfect agony of despair.

"Go to meet John! Never, never! Oh! Heaven! what shall I do?"

Voices without in loud dispute—an altercation, surely! The tramp of feet upon the stairs.

"I know what I'm about, sir! This is a free country, I presume! If I search every apartment in the house I'll find this Frenchman's rooms!"

"Oh, heavens! my husband! John's voice! John's! Oh, for pity's sake, Sir Archibald, shield me—save me! What can I do! If he finds me here, I—"

Speech failed her, and she could but wring her hands in mute entreaty. The baronet himself was painfully bewildered.

Just then, moreover, there was not a second to reflect upon the best course to be pursued.

Instinctively he flung open an inner door—leading he knew not whither—and motioned her towards it.

Without one syllable of protest Vivien darted past him, and took refuge in ambush within. Sir Archibald closed the door upon her noiselessly, and drew a long breath of relief. He would thus be enabled to temporise, at any rate—this much, at least, was certain gain.

"Sir!" the word was uttered at his ear in a low, authoritative tone, so stern, so hoarse, that guiltless though he was, and brave, dauntless man withal, yet Sir Archie afterwards confessed he felt his own heart momentarily quail, as turning, he confronted one whom he instinctively recognized as John Staunton, albeit the two men had never met before. "You—you are not—"

"No, Mr. Staunton, I am not the man whom you presumably came here to meet. My name is Archibald Hope. Your wife's family do me the honour to regard me as their friend; and her—humph! Gaston De Lauray, I am happy to say, is not here!"

Never to his dying day did the young baronet forget the expression which just then flitted across the other's grey, drawn face; his eyes momentarily flashed fire, his nostrils dilated, he drew himself up to his full height, his clenched hands hanging down straight and rigid by his sides.

John, indeed, was terrible to look upon just then—terrible in his mute, impotent anguish, his voiceless wrath, his helpless woe. Gazing at him Sir Arthur realized at once his misery and his love.

"He is not here!" he echoed in a voice of thunder—thunder when it rolls afar off among the hills; and his fingers clenched and unclenched themselves convulsively as though it would, in truth, have gone ill with his foe had their deadly grip just then hovered near his throat. "Where is he? Who and what are you, who thus presume to thrust yourself between man and man? And where is she! Speak, fellow, speak! Where is the woman who was once my wife? Has she fled with Gaston De Lauray?"

"Be calm, Mr. Staunton, I beseech you, and all will yet be well. Be calm, less for your own sake even than that of all those dear to you, as to myself. The Rector, remember, lies stretched this moment between life and death, crying out piteously for Vivien! Vivien who may yet be restored to him, and you, if—if only you will not act too hastily or deal too harshly in this critical emergency with the woman who you love. Be calm, be reasonable, and I promise you all will yet end well."

"Go preach to others!" was the grim retort. Then in imperious tones, John added,—"Explain, this moment, without further procrastination, the drift of all this. You may be the accomplice of that French scoundrel for aught I know. Your part may be to keep me fooling

here. How can I tell who and what you are! Each instant is precious. If he be not here, where on earth is he! And where's she who was once my wife? Fellow! Can't you speak?"

Seeing that the crucial moment had come at last, and that it would be worse than unwise to attempt to temporize further, the baronet armed himself for the worst.

"He—Gaston De Lauray," he responded, quietly, "is nearing Charing Cross at this moment. I believe and fondly hope lured thither by a telegram which I ventured to send—er—humph! in a lady's name—a lady whom he expected here. I contrived to note a meeting (which I held undesirable) by the adoption of this simple ruse."

"The lady" wired briefly that she would explain all later—meanwhile she awaited her friend at the Cross. Off flew De Lauray, whilst I remained—remained to receive your wife (plain words are best, Mr. Staunton, in a crisis like the present, so you will pardon them, I feel sure); your wife, who has not even seen De Lauray; your wife, whom you can therefore take back as a penitent suppliant to your heart and home at once, Mr. Staunton—for her own sake, for yours, not less than for that of one who already stands, for aught we know, within the dread shadow of the valley of death. Think of this before you act."

"Where is she!" cried John Staunton, hoarsely, covering his eyes with one hand, for indeed he felt himself in danger of being utterly unmanned.

"She is penitent—she is broken-hearted. She is here!" and with these last words Sir Archibald flung wide the inner door, and motioned Vivien to advance.

But there was no movement from within, no responsive murmur, no sign, no sound of a living presence, not even the *frou-frou* of a woman's dress.

For one moment the hearts of both men stood still, for one moment both gasped for breath; and as by mute accord they turned and gazed into each other's face there was that just then in the eyes of both which made these two fast friends till death.

Then together they advanced, to find Vivien lying in a huddled heap on the floor, insensible, rigid, lifeless, seemingly, with her golden head bowed in the dust, prone at the feet of that outraged husband whom she had lacked strength and courage to face.

At sight of that piteous spectacle Staunton physically recoiled, shuddering visibly like a man who has received an unexpected blow.

"Oh, Heaven!" he groaned, "Oh, Heaven!" covering his face with both his hands.

Whilst Sir Archibald, kneeling down beside her, lifted Vivien's fragile form in his arms as though she had been a sleeping child, murmuring the while between his teeth,—

"Courage, Staunton, courage! This is the best thing perhaps which could have happened after all. You will be calmer, cooler when she wakes, able to realize what it would have been if—if she had never awakened more! Here, kiss your wife, man, kiss her! Your arms should bear her, not these of mine. Ye gods, she is scarce a feather's weight! Take her, Staunton, take her!"

(To be continued.)

It has been the custom to wash wool by various alkaline processes, but this is likely to be superseded by the new method, which is a naphtha cleaning. Powerful pumps force the naphtha through and through the wool without injuring the fibre in the least, and at the same time the naphtha extracts all of the natural oil out of the wool. The fibre is in very much better condition than when cleansed by any other process. A further advantage by this means of cleansing is that the wool oil is recoverable from the naphtha by a very simple process, and is easily resolved in a perfectly pure state. In the cleansing of five hundred thousand pounds of wool eighty thousand pounds of pure wool oil were saved.

HANDS AND FEATURES—SIGNS OF CHARACTER.

—101—

It has been well remarked the principal lines of the hand may easily be traced: The life-line, which runs round the base of the thumb; the line of the head, which begins alongside of the line of life (sometimes joining it), and crossing the middle of the palm; and the line of the heart, which goes from one side of the hand to the other at the base of the fingers. If the line of life is of a ruddy colour, long and unbroken, extending nearly or quite down to the wrist line, it foretells good health and long life; if it be broken in any point it denotes severe sickness; if short, early death; if double, it shows remarkable strength and vitality. The lines encircling the wrist number the years of life, one line marking thirty years.

If a character like the sun occurs on the life-line it denotes loss of an eye or blindness; and each cross or knot means some misfortune or difficulty, great or small, according to the size of the mark. The little lines are the lesser cares and troubles. Wavy lines, in the ends of the fingers or elsewhere, foretell death by drowning. A crescent-shaped mark below the little finger and below the line of the heart denotes insanity. A well-defined short line joining the life-line indicates marriage. If no such line appears, the person will remain single, unless there be a short line or lines on the side of the hand below the little finger, as these also denote the number of times married. The lines extending down between the third or ring finger, and the little finger to the line of the heart, number the loves of a lifetime. If but a single line is visible, and that is deep and clear, the person will love faithfully and warmly. A long and well-defined line of the head promises intellectual power, but it may be too long; as, if it extends quite to the edge of the hand it indicates too much calculation, craft, meanness. It should end under the third finger or thereabouts. If it is forked or double towards the end, it denotes deception and double-dealing, though, in a hand otherwise good, it may mean only extreme reticence or shyness. When this line is very short and faint it shows stupidity, foolishness.

If the line of the heart is long, extending from the edge of the hand below the little finger, up between the first and second fingers, it indicates an affectionate disposition, and also promises well for the happiness of the possessor. If it sends down short lines toward the head line, it shows that affection must be founded upon respect; but if these small lines go upward, love is more a passion and impulse. When the line of the heart is broken it denotes inconsistency. But judgment must not be formed from any one appearance or line of the hand, as there are many things to be considered.

We should look in the left hand chiefly for honour, riches, loves, and misfortunes, and in the right for whatever pertains to health and length of days. All lines, if pale and wide, tell the absence of the quality attributed to that line, or the existence of the opposite quality. For instance, a pale, wide line of the heart indicates coldness or even cruelty. When the lines of the left hand are clearest and ruddiest, its possessor resembles his mother, both mentally and physically.

In the practice of the art of palmistry some knowledge of physiognomy is of great advantage; indeed, the two sciences go hand in hand, one supplementing the other. This is why the shrewd gipsy fortune teller scans the face almost more closely than the hand of her patron. A few set rules in regard to the features and characteristics of the human face may well be added in this connection.

And first of all, the soul dwells in the eye; and the ability to understand its language is inborn with most people without having to study it; but a few words in regard to it may not be amiss. Very quiet eyes that impress and embarrass one with their great repose signify self-command, but also great complacency and conceit. Eyes that rove hither and thither while their

possessor speaks denote a deceitful, designing mind. Eyes in which the white has a yellowish tinge, and is streaked with reddish veins, denote strong passions. Very blue eyes bespeak a mind inclined to coquetry. Grey eyes signify intelligence; greenish, falsehood and a liking for scandal; black eyes, a passionate, lively temperament; and brown, a kind, happy disposition.

Of the nose—a Roman nose denotes an enterprising, business-like character; a long nose is a sign of good sense; a perfectly straight nose indicates a pure and noble soul, unless the eyes contradict it; a *nez retroussé* signifies a spirit of mischief, wit, and dash; a large nose generally indicates a good mind and heart; a very small nose, good nature, but lack of energy.

Thick lips indicate either great genius or great stupidity; very thin lips, cruelty and falsehood, particularly if they are habitually compressed. Dimples in the cheek signify roguery; in the chin, love and coquetry. A lean face is an indication of intelligence; a fat face shows a person inclined to falsehood.

Inaccessibility is accompanied by an erect posture, open nostrils, moist temples, displaying superficial veins, which stand out and throb under the least excitement; large, unequal, ill-arranged eyes, and equal use of both hands.

A good genius may be expected from middle stature, blue or grey eyes, large prominent forehead, with temples a little hollow, a fixed, attentive look and habitual inclination of the head.

FACETIE.

HE (delighted with a new play): "Isn't it grand?" SHE: "Perfectly lovely! It must have been made by Worth."

BROWN: "They say Green has been wandering in his mind lately." BLACK: "Well, he's safe enough, he can't get far."

DOCTOR: "Professor, a little son has just arrived." PROFESSOR: "Tell him to wait in the ante-room."

SHE: "Oh, George, what shall we do if the boat sinks?" HE (very pale): "Never mind about that, Sarah, it's not our boat."

IKKY (slipping a ring on her finger): "Now we're engaged, Rebecca, ain't we?" "Not till faster examines the ring, Ikky."

"NAME twelve animals of the Polar regions," said the professor. And the despairing student wrote: "Six seals and six polar bears."

REGINALD: "Oh, if there were only something I could do to prove the depth of my affections!" "There is. Don't talk nonsense, please."

WHILES are learning something. They are more often seen in schools nowadays than heretofore.

WALTER: "Say, Jack, what is the capital of Switzerland?" JACK (who has just returned from abroad): "Why, the money they get from travellers, of course."

NEW COOK: "Shall I get any milk to-day, mum?" BRIDE of a Month: "Yes, Now, get some buttermilk, and we'll make some butter. We must try and be economical."

HE (an undesired visitor): "Nice dog, very! Have you taught it any new tricks since I was here last?" SHE (sweetly): "Yes; it will fetch your hat, if you whistle."

PROFESSOR (drawing letter out of his pocket): "It's very strange. I'm sure I put this letter in the letter-box; but," searching further, "goodness knows where my handkerchief is."

"Do you think, young man, that you can give my daughter all she asks for?" questioned papa, grimly. "I—aw—think so, sir," murmured the lover bashfully. "She says she wants only me."

FIRST FOOTBALLER: "Did Halfback go round and wallop that editor who wrote about 'The Brutality of Football?'" SECOND FOOTBALLER: "No." "Why not?" "Halfback is in the hospital."

"My old aunt has sent me a gallon jar of cherry-brandy," said a toper to a party of friends; "and, though I don't care much for cherries, still I fully appreciate the spirit in which they were tendered."

WIFE: "I thought that couple walking before were married, but they are not." Husband: "How do you know?" Wife: "She stopped to look into a shop-window, and he stopped and looked too."

"YOUR uncle, sir," said the physician, who had been hastily called in, "is threatened with softening of the brain." "Any symptoms of that kind about his heart?" inquired the poor relation anxiously.

MRS. STROMGIND: "If women would only stand shoulder to shoulder they would soon win the suffrage." Mrs. Guffy: "But, madam, that is something they can't do while the fashion for big sleeves prevails."

AWKWARD SPOUSE: "I see our set is to have a grand charity ball. Did you ever dance for charity?" Pretty Wife: "Of course. Don't you remember how I used to take pity on you and dance with you when we first met?"

"I HAVE such an indulgent husband," said Mrs. Peterby to Mrs. Yerger. "Yes," responded Mrs. Yerger quietly, "my husband says that sometimes Mr. Peterby indulges too much." And now the ladies no longer talk to each other.

SHOPPER: "Have you any toys a child can play with on Sunday?" SALESMAN: "Yes, here are a box of soldiers." SHOPPER: "Play with soldiers on the Sabbath!" SALESMAN: "But these belong to the Salvation Army."

EDITOR: "What do you mean by this expression you use, 'A shapeless mass'?" Reporter: "Why—er—um—anything that—I mean, something that—a—er—why, you know." Editor: "Thanks! I only asked for information."

HELEN: "I don't know, George. It seems such a solemn thing to marry. Have you counted the cost?" GEORGE: "The cost, Helen—the cost! Don't worry. I've got a cousin a minister that'll marry us for nothing."

MRS. WICKWIRE: "You know very well that your cigar bill for one day amounts to more than all my incidental expenses for a week." Mr. Wickwire: "That's just a woman's luck. I wish I could get on as cheaply as you can."

"I HAVE a very superstitious tenant in one of my Edgbaston houses," said one Birmingham gentleman to another. "In what way?" "He's behind in rent for three months, but says he won't move because I served notice on him on Friday."

LAWYER: "You say the prisoner stole your watch. What distinguishing feature was there about the watch?" WITNESS: "It had my sweetheart's portrait in it." LAWYER: "Ah, I see! A woman in the case."

LEMBRICK LADY (entering the kitchen): "Bridget, didn't I see that policeman kiss you?" Bridget: "Well, ma'am, sure an' yes would not have me lay meilf open to arrist for resistin' an officer, ma'am."

"No," said the man who stayed in town while his family went to the sea-shore. "I haven't had any direct news from them. But they are enjoying themselves immensely." "How can you tell if they don't write?" "I read about it in my check-book."

THE PHYSICIAN: "Great Scott! young lady, you say you had eleven dishes of ice cream, four soda waters and a ham sandwich. Can you wonder why you're sick?" The Young Lady (foebly): "It must have been the ham sandwich, I suppose."

"Do you think there is much sentiment in business?" ventured the gentle old fellow who writes stories for children. "Not very much, I fear," the staff poet replied. "But," he added, more cheerfully, "there's a good deal of business in sentiment."

MRS. DORCAS: "When you returned from the country I suppose you found the place all upset. It's always that way when a man is left to keep house." Mrs. Cobwigger: "Yes, my dear; the litter was terrible. The only place that was cleaned up was the wine-cellar."

MR. COURTENAY (flatteringly): "I had the blues awfully when I came here to-night, Miss Fisher, but they are all gone now. You are as good as medicine." Miss Fisher's little brother: "Yes; father himself says she'll be a drug in the market if she doesn't catch some fellow soon."

WE were waiting for the poll to be declared in one of our Lancashire towns. Some of the remarks heard in the crowd were very good, a specimen of which is as follows. After discussing for some time the chances of the rival candidates a working man said: "Well, I don't care so long as one of them gets in!"

SCENE: INDIA.—Sergeant to Cook: "Why, these eggs are hard-boiled again this morning." Cook: "Very sorry, sahib; me boll 'em plenty soft to-morrow." Sergeant (next morning): "Why, you scamp, these eggs are harder than ever." Cook: "Me can't help it, sahib. Me boll him six hours, and still he not come soft."

FIRST SEARIDE VISITOR: "My gracious! Have you been sitting here all the morning! The whole town has been down to the beach to see the wreck. Big steamer ashore. Awful time. Never saw such a sight." Second Visitor: (a newspaper reporter, yawning): "I'm on a vacation."

It was at an hotel on the Scottish mountains. "Oh, Marianne, I do think that gown of yours is just too lovely for anything, and it is so appropriate to wear up here!" The other smiled self-approvingly. "Yes," she said, smoothing down the folds of the frock in question; "I do think this gown sets off the mountains better than any other I ever had on."

COURTEOUS MANAGER (to actor who has applied for position in Shakespearean company): "You have talent, young man, talent of a very exceptional order; but I regret to say that Shakespeare has not created any character which will doze off nicely with your genius. Sorry, very sorry; but, of course, we are neither of us to blame for the shortcomings of the playwright."

"Do you know of any mitigating circumstances in your case?" said a Texas justice to Sam Johnson, accused of stealing. "Lemme off dis time." "Is it your first offence?" "Fast offence, sah." "How did you manage to get the chickens so cleverly without disturbing the dog that was in the yard?" "Dat comes from practice, boss," said Sam, who felt flattered by the remarks of the Court.

MRS. BROWN: "It's funny, but I meet you wherever I go." Mrs. White: "Yes; fact is, my husband is right in the midst of his house cleaning, and I am ready to go anywhere to escape from the atmosphere of soapuds and deluges of hot water. I really believe he is crazy on the subject of house cleaning." Mrs. Brown: "That's just the way with Mr. Brown. It's perfectly awful, I haven't been near the house for a week."

At a table d'hôte a Marseillais was seated near an old army captain. The Marseillais was relating to a third guest his remarkable experiences in Algeria. "The very evening of my arrival in Algiers," he said, "I took a walk on the Constantine-road, and what should I meet in the path but a lion. I put my gun to my shoulder, pressed the trigger, and biff! the monster bit the dust. The ball had pierced his heart." The old captain glared and fidgeted. The Marseillais went on,—"the next evening, when I went for a promenade on the Oran road, I met another lion square in the path. It was but the work of an instant to put my gun to my shoulder, take deliberate aim, and fire. The lion fell dead; the ball had gone in between his eyes." The old captain rose and eyed the bold hunter. "If you kill another lion," he said, "I will pull your nose." He resumed his seat and his eating. The Marseillais did not appear to have heard the captain, and went on, in the same tone,—"The third evening I took the Bone road. I had not gone far when I perceived an enormous lion coming toward me. Up went my gun. I pulled the trigger—the cap snapped—it wouldn't go off. I had barely time to save myself by flight to a neighbouring house."

SOCIETY.

On Saturday evening, November 9th, the fifty-fourth anniversary of the Prince of Wales's natal day will be celebrated, and festivities will take place each day during the following week, when there will be at Sandringham a large pheasant-shooting party.

THE Duke and Duchess of York will remain at Sandringham until the beginning of February.

THE Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Hesse are to visit Baden in January, after which they will go to St. Petersburg for several weeks.

THE Princess of Wales has finished a picture of the chateau of Bornstorff, which is to be a birthday present to the Prince of Wales.

THE Duke and Duchess of York are to be the guests next month of Lord and Lady Albemarle for a few days at Quidenham Hall, Norfolk, where there is now some of the best shooting in the country.

THE Queen of Italy is having a villa built in the Aosta valley. It will be ready for her Majesty's occupation next year, and will command most lovely views, while quite a large pine-wood is to be included in the grounds.

THE Prince of Wales has decided upon paying his promised visit to the Earl of Lonsdale, at Lowther Castle, in December of this year, instead of in January of next, as was at first arranged. Lord Lonsdale is sure to give the Prince a great reception, and the best of the pheasant shooting, which is said to be among the finest in England, will be reserved for his Royal Highness.

THE Queen goes out in her garden-chair at Balmoral every morning after her nine o'clock breakfast, and stays in the grounds for an hour. Then Her Majesty is engaged in business until half-past one. Luncheon is at two o'clock, and about half-past three the Queen goes out driving in an open carriage, and usually ends her airing at the Danzig Shiel, a pretty cottage in Ballochbuie Forest, where she drinks tea. Her Majesty seldom returns to the Castle until after dark, and dinner is served at a quarter to nine.

THE Duchess of York has recently had some remarkably pretty shoes made to order by a London firm. There are several pairs of bronze, and, like all shoes made for her Royal Highness, they have the low "Louis" heel, and a soft lining of bright coloured padded satin. Some similar ones of black kid are included in the order. But the cream of the batch is the dainty collection of white, or pale coloured slippers for evening wear. A pair of Court shaped white kid have an embroidery of fine crystal and gold beads on the toes.

THE Duke of Coburg will arrive at Clarence House about the 31st, and is to stay in England until the middle of December. The Duke will pay one or two visits in Devonshire and Cornwall, and on November 5th he is to present new colours to the Royal Marines at Plymouth. He is to be the guest of the Prince and Princess of Wales at Sandringham for a week, and he will shoot in Windsor Great Park with Prince Christian. The Duke and Duchess of Coburg and their daughters are to spend several weeks at St. Petersburg next winter, arriving there about the end of January.

LIFE is a very simple, unpretentious thing at Bornstorff, and no one is better pleased than Royalty when the bow of etiquette and formality can be for a while unstrung. A couple of small and plainly furnished rooms were allotted to the Empress Dagmar, as the Danish people still like to call the widow of the Czar Alexander, the Princess of Wales has only a single room, and the King and Queen of the Hellenes two. Eight o'clock breakfast in the Queen's room, letters and reading afterwards, luncheon at one, then tennis, walking and driving until five o'clock tea, which is taken in the Queen's apartments, a simple dinner of five or six courses only at seven, music and cards fill the rest of the day, and by eleven o'clock the Royal party have retired for the night.

STATISTICS.

WE only have one doctor to every 1,450 people. PARIS has seventy halls where fencing is taught.

THE coin collection in the British Museum now consists of 250,000 specimens.

THE most costly tomb in existence is that which was erected to the memory of Mahomed. The diamonds and rubies used in the decorations are worth £2,000,000.

THE following facts concerning accidents to road traffic in the busiest thoroughfares of London are interesting. They are based on observations made on fifty consecutive days. In a single day, from 8 A.M. to 8 P.M. some 12,866 horses and vehicles passed along Cheapside, and 5,350 along Cannon-street. During that time it was found that 542 accidents took place on wood pavement, 719 on granite, and 1,066 on asphalt.

GEMS.

THE man who can endure everything is either a saint or a cur.

INTELLIGENCE without character is a candle stuck in the mud.

MANNERS should be a varnish, not a veneer. They should bring out, not conceal, the true grain of the wood.

THE voice of conscience is so delicate that it is easy to stifle it; but it is also so clear that it is impossible to mistake it.

MEN of intellect who do not cultivate their powers are like those who, possessing large houses, prefer to live in the kitchen.

WHEN soured by disappointment we must endeavour to pursue some fixed and pleasing course of study, that there may be no blank leaf in our book of life. Painful and disagreeable ideas vanish from the mind that can fix its attention upon any subject.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

BUTTERMILK MUFFINS.—Add half a teaspoonful of soda, dissolved in two tablespoonfuls of warm water, to one cup of buttermilk; add one beaten egg, half a teaspoonful of salt, and then stir in one and a half cups of whole wheat flour. Mix quickly, and bake in gem pans in a quick oven twenty minutes.

GERMAN PEACH CAKES.—Beat two eggs; add to them one cup of peach liquor. Stir in one and a half cups of flour and a teaspoonful of baking powder. Add a tablespoonful of melted butter. Mix, and turn the whole into a shallow greased pan. Take the halves of the peaches, press them into the batter, leaving the rounded side up. Dust thickly with sugar, and bake in a quick oven twenty minutes. Serve warm.

DELICIOUS FRUIT CREAM.—Three cups of milk, one cup of cream, one large egg (selecting one with yolk of deep yellow colour), two full tablespoonfuls of flour, one cup of sugar, one level tablespoonful of gelatine (if to be moulded), one half pound of English walnuts, weighed in the shell, one quarter pound of figs. Soak the gelatine in a little of the cold milk, saving two or more tablespoonfuls of the milk to mix with the sugar, flour and egg; heat milk to near boiling, and stir in gradually the flour, sugar and egg to which the cold milk has been added. When the custard is cooked, add the gelatine, cream, and one tablespoonful of vanilla. Freeze. After freezing, before packing, add the nuts and figs, which have been previously chopped, beating the mixture well with a large spoon. Pack. If in emptying cream from a mould it should stick, put a towel wet in boiling water over the mould to loosen it. Then if it seems creamy set on ice a few moments to harden.

MISCELLANEOUS.

ONE-FIFTH of the entire African continent is a trackless desert.

SOME specimens of mediæval helmets at least 11 lb. in weight are preserved in the European museums.

To ascend Mont Blanc costs about £10, as there must by law be two guides and a porter to each person.

A TICKET OF LEAVE system similar to that which exists in England has been approved by the Egyptian Government.

THE perfume of the nutmeg flower is said by some naturalists to have an intoxicating effect on small birds.

SCIENTISTS believe that all salt, wherever found, has come originally from the sea in some way or other.

So varied is the climate of Mexico that the products of Polar and Tropical regions can be successfully raised there.

THE leaves of the talipot palm, in Ceylon, sometimes attain a length of twenty feet. The natives use them to make tents.

THE Turkish Court pianist, Dussap Pasha, receives £800 a year for his services, but he is temporarily suspended every time he plays a tune the Sultan does not care to hear.

DURING the tenth century no woman was allowed to appear at church without a veil. A real veil, too, covering and concealing the features, in order that the prayers and meditations of the men might not be disturbed by the contemplation of feminine loveliness.

A FLYING MACHINE, operated with pedals attached to revolving fans, has been invented by a machinist of Rouen. It is something like a bicycle. The inventor's son, starting on it from an elevation of 125 feet, made half a mile through the air in less than three minutes.

THE peach is said to have been originally a poisonous almond. Its fruit parts were used to poison arrows, and for that purpose were introduced into Persia. Transplantation has not only removed its poisonous qualities, but turned it into the delicious fruit we now enjoy.

SLATE PENCILS are now manufactured of bone. They are not likely, however, to meet with the approval of the small boy, as they are unbreakable; and, still worse, noiseless. The peculiar and delightfully shrill, musical screech of the old-fashioned slate-pencil is naturally a great source of amusement to the young.

AN automatic nail driver is a late invention. It is arranged with slides and runways, into which the nail drops through fitted courses that necessitate it going in right-end first. As the nail, in proper position, slides down through one of these channels a hammer automatically comes to the attack and drives the nail into place. A tack-driving machine of the same sort is also made. In factories where large numbers of boxes are turned out these may have their uses, but for ordinary, every-day usefulness the old-fashioned, flat-nosed hammer still holds its own, even at the risk of an occasional battered thumb and fractured temper.

ONE reason why old lace is so valuable is because it is woven in lost patterns. Lace making in France received a severe check during the French revolution. Before that time whole villages supported themselves by lace making, and patterns were handed down from one generation to another. When the Reign of Terror began all work of this kind was interrupted for a time. After the storm had subsided the dealers and workers were far apart—some dead, some lost, some escaped to foreign lands, and such of the women as remained were bound by their oath to work for but one dealer; they regarded the obligation as binding, and there were instances where they suffered actual want rather than break their oath. Some, however, taught their children and their grandchildren, and many patterns were in this way preserved. Some of the daintiest and finest patterns were never recovered, and to-day specimens of these laces are exceedingly valuable.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

F. S.—You had best consult a lawyer.

BRANDON.—We should call the locality in London.

TENANT.—Until you do you will remain liable for the rent.

HARRIS.—Submit the deed and other documents to a lawyer.

INQUIRER.—Each case of the sort is governed by its own circumstances.

FIRST EDITION.—You might possibly pick up a copy at some second-hand bookstall.

ERIC.—We cannot find any mention of an exhibition bearing that title.

UNDECIDED.—Some prefer one, another others. It is purely a matter of taste.

CONSTANT READER.—Certain days in the week; there is no charge for admission.

HOSCHWITZ.—Manila paper pasted over the backs of pictures will exclude dust perfectly.

H. V.—Any good maker would build one for you; they are not usually kept in stock.

COCKNEY.—"The Campbells are Comin'" is a very old Scottish air. Copies of it date back to 1620.

STUPID.—It is taught at most academies; you could not learn to perform gracefully from a book.

PHIL.—A football referee does not give a decision until he is asked to do so by the players.

ONE IN TROUBLE.—There is no public institution of the sort, but the clergyman of your parish may know of a suitable home.

ARNOLD.—Many works describing both countries have been published from time to time, but most are untrustworthy.

DUBIOUS.—It does sometimes, at least, aid in the often troublesome and protracted process which always requires patient perseverance.

E. A.—When stung by a wasp apply immediately a raw onion to the part affected. The application has been known to afford relief instantaneously.

KITTY.—The flying fish rises ten or twelve feet out of the water and keeps the air for one hundred yards, when it is obliged to wet its fins by dipping.

LOVER OF THE "LONDON READER."—To "polish out" the marks you would find quite as expensive as to replace the square.

DUBIOUS.—From all you tell us we do not think you could improve your condition by emigrating, whereas you might make it a great deal worse.

IGNORANT.—No Member of Parliament receives a salary in that capacity. If he be a Minister or public functionary the case is of course different.

H. WORSTER.—A tin open filled with vinegar and placed on the bank of the stove will prevent the spread of cooking odours throughout the house.

ORCHID.—It is known that some of the stars really move, and it is supposed that all are in motion, some going along in a path, and some turning round each other.

W. K.—Yes, the raven can be taught to imitate the human voice. It has been known to pronounce a few words with great distinctness. It is very long-lived—attaining quite frequently the age of one hundred years.

O. H.—There are various methods used, but our climate hardly lends itself to bringing the out-of-door methods to perfection, and the ways adopted in factories need special appliances, and are beyond our province.

OUTRAGED.—There is no thunder to what is called summer lightning, because the lightning clouds are so far distant that the sound of thunder is lost before it reaches the ears of the spectator.

ANGIE.—A suitor so persistent as the one described, especially a rejected suitor, should be treated with the utmost disdain, and, if necessary, made to feel that his company is insufferable.

DISCONTENTED.—Amiability of temper, an obliging disposition, a sunny smile, and a heart free from guile, are more apt to secure lasting friends than any physical gift. Be content with your present personal appearance.

COOKIE.—If the water be boiling, three and a half minutes will boil eggs soft; four minutes will render them quite done; five minutes will make them hard, and in six minutes they will be fit for garnishing salads or any dishes requiring them.

KATIE.—By all means insist upon getting your letters, and have your friends and his understand that you have urged their delivery, but without avail. Of course, there is no way to force him to give them up if he persists in keeping them.

ONE WHO WOULD LIEK TO KNOW.—If prosecuted for bigamy she might get anything from a day's to a twelve-month's imprisonment—all depending upon the extent to which she could show she had acted in the honest belief that her first husband had ceased to exist.

HOSCHWITZ.—The pungent odour of pennyroyal is very disagreeable to ants and other creeping things. If the herbs cannot be obtained, get the oil of pennyroyal and saturate something with it, and lay around the places infested by these pests.

REPENTANT TED.—You must make the first overtures. The young lady's apparent coolness arose from a little spice of female caprice or pique, aggravated by the attentions which in a fit of jealousy you paid to another girl.

WORRIED.—It would seem that your brother is the one to take a decided stand in the matter. You would be extremely foolish to give up a good home where you are happy on account of the meddlesome tongues of a lot of gossip.

IDA.—For rose sachet, take powdered rose leaves andorris root, each three pounds; powdered bergamot peel, one pound; powdered cloves and cinnamon, each six ounces; powdered acacia and orange flowers, each eight ounces; starch, three pounds. Mix and sift.

REGINALD.—Dip the page in a strong solution of oxalic acid, then in a solution of one part muriatic acid to six parts of water; after which bathe the page for some time in cold, running water to remove trace of acid, and allow it slowly to dry.

REGULAR READER.—Lucifer matches were patented in 1864, while friction matches preceded them by thirteen years. The improved machinery by which matches are now made by the million at a trifling cost was the inventions of comparatively recent years.

THE DEATHWATCH.

DARK—still—impenetrable night! I lay
In dreamy thought to watch the hours away,
When suddenly across the chamber's gloom
A weird, mysterious tap-tap seemed to come,
As of a ghost with summons from the tomb;
Or that some fiend, in hesitating mood,
Outside of yonder casement trembling stood;
Then, by a sudden impulse, struck the pane
With hooting words of ill from worlds profane.

Tap-tap-tap-tap—again and oft again!
Is it the restless watch dog's loosened chain
Beneath my chamber window? or the fall
Of drops which drip from off the turret wall?
Or can invading bat or moth be there,
To flit its wings against the mullion bare?
Or owlet's pinion, in its stealthy sail,
Abroad to forage for the nightly meal?
The woodpecker, safe lodged within his tree,
Disturbs no rest. Ye gods, what can it be!

Ah! 'Tis the deathwatch, calling on its prey—
That demon whose delight is our dismay!
Again 'tis still—again its weird-like rap
Seems as a ghostly sign. Tap-tap-tap-tap
Against the window frame! Hush! Demon, why
Accost me thus with threats of devilry!
Thine to invade the solemnness of night
When sleep and silence claim their vested right?

Again the sound comes sad and fitfully
Through the lone chamber as the night winds sigh.
What is it, Fate, in terror thou wouldst crave,
With vengeful tongue, as if from out the grave?
Is my good mother dead? God rest her soul,
If such should be the purport of thy role,
Or is my only child—my boy at sea—
Hurled from the mast into eternity?
Or other horrors hast thou yet to deal,
Too great to hide—too bitter to reveal?
Speak, speak, then! What fatality hath come
To darken thus the portals of my home?
What ruthless hand is lifted o'er my brow,
Or greater anguish can my bosom know?
Tell me the worst—what fate hast thou in store,
Or, rather than thy curse which haunts me now,
Crush me at once, and bid me rise no more!

Come, foolish jester, from thy terrors dread;
Let folly pass and reason rule instead;
Learn that thy God permits no seer to rise
To teach or tamper with our destinies;
Then let thy common-sense full license give
To the poor harmless grub which only taps to live!

T. W. W.

COLIN.—Personally call upon the various firms; you would then have opportunity to say a word on behalf of your invention calculated to meet objections which are certain to be raised and could not be answered by your circular; advertising for sale is not likely to help you.

BRENDICE.—The bridesmaid and best man are purely ornamental figures at a marriage; they do not serve any legal purpose whatever, and could be entirely dispensed with for that matter; but it would be an arrangement very much in accordance with custom to have bride's brother as best man, and bridegroom's sister as bride's maid.

RHEUMATIC.—Relief from some kinds of rheumatic pains can be obtained, it is said, by bathing the afflicted parts night and morning, or through the day, with warm salt and water, rubbing the solution well into the skin. The proportions are about two tablespoonfuls of salt to a quart of water. While bathing allow exposure to a draught of air.

AMBITIOUS.—Unless you are gifted by nature with the qualifications necessary for an actor, and possess more than ordinary patience and perseverance; unless your abilities have been tested and approved before competent judges, you can never succeed. We therefore counsel you to embrace some other profession or calling in which success is less difficult.

SIX YEARS' READER.—Half a pound of American pearlsh, one pound and a half quicklime, slake the lime in water, then add the pearlsh, and mix the whole into the consistency of paint. Apply to both sides of the glass, allow it to remain on for twelve hours, when the putty will be softened and you can remove the glass with ease.

RHODA.—To make scent bags without flowers, take two ounces of bruised coriander seed, two ounces of bruised calamus, a quarter of an ounce of bruised mace, a quarter of an ounce of bruised cinnamon, an eighth of an ounce of bruised cloves, two ounces of powdered orris root, and an eighth of an ounce of musk. Mix the ingredients together, and stitch a portion in small silk bags.

GHITA.—Roses may be preserved by means of common salt. The process simply consists in intimately mixing the roses with about a quarter of their weight of good, dry salt, and ramming down the mixture as tightly as possible in strong casks or jars. The roses should be recently (the white are generally used) gathered, and free from dew and moisture; and the salt should be quite dry.

DON QUIXOTE.—It is the editor's privilege to erase, interline, abbreviate, or condense articles which are intrusted to him for supervision. So long as the sketch, or story, as the case may be, is not materially changed you should not complain, especially as you are an inexperienced writer, and not, as few are, above criticism. If publishers were not allowed the privilege referred to the number of contributions rejected would be larger than ever.

DISTRESSED CLARA.—If these stains on the table linen are of long-standing, and have been washed with soap, it is rather difficult to get rid of them. But javelle water—which can be made at home or bought of a druggist—is generally successful. Put about half a pint of javelle water and a quart of clean water into an earthen bowl; let the stained article soak in this for several hours; then rinse thoroughly in three waters. It is only white goods that can be treated in this manner, as the javelle water bleaches out the colour.

H. G.—We do not know what powder you allude to. A wash that answers for either wood or stone may help you. Slake about half a bushel of unsalted lime with boiling water, keeping it covered during the process, strain and add one peck of salt, dissolved in warm water, three pounds of ground rice, put in boiling water and cook to a thin paste; half a pound of powdered Spanish whiting, and one pound of clear glue dissolved in warm water; mix these well together, and let the mixture stand for several days before using. When needed boil it up and put it on with your whitewashing brush as hot as possible.

RILEY.—A young man may find great pleasure in a young woman's society, may really enjoy her company, comradeship and conversation, and may plainly show that he does so, without giving any actual evidence of what people call love. There are a great many young girls who fancy that every man who looks at them in an interested way, treats them well or finds any pleasure in their society, is in love with them. It is just as well not to imagine that love exists until there is some positive evidence of it. If young girls would take this view of the case they would save themselves and everybody else a great deal of trouble.

NESTA.—An icing for decorative purposes is made by mixing one teaspoonful of cream tartar with one of powdered sugar and stirring it into the whites of three eggs (without having been beaten); then stir them well together. The cake must be cold to use icing. It can be made of different colours if desired—yellow with lemon or orange, pink with part red sugar, or strawberries or cranberries, and green with spinach. Grate the yellow of a lemon or orange, pour some of the juice upon the gratings, and strain the juice out through muslin; strawberries, cranberries and spinach leaves to be crushed and used in the same way. Add powdered sugar to these juices to make them thick before adding to the icing, or the icing will be too thin. In using it for decorative purposes, make a funnel out of stiff writing paper and apply the icing in whatever shape your taste suggests. A good pattern is a wreath of grape leaves and fruit. It is best for a beginner only to outline the leaves and veins. Allow one drop of icing for each grape. A wreath of roses is not difficult, and can be made very realistic if done in coloured icing, using the spinach green for leaves and stems, the pink for petals, and yellow for stamens.

THE LONDON READER, Post-free. Three-halfpence Weekly; or Quarterly, One Shilling and Eightpence.

ALL BACK NUMBERS, PARTS and VOLUMES are in print, and may be had of all Booksellers.

NOTICE.—Part 41, Now Ready, price Sixpence, post-free, Eightpence. Also Vol. LXV., bound in cloth, 4s. 6d.

THE INDEX to VOL. LXV. is Now Ready; Price One Penny, post-free, Three-halfpence.

ALL LETTERS to be Addressed to the Editor of THE LONDON READER, 224, Strand, W.C.

†† We cannot undertake to return rejected manuscripts.

London: Published for the Proprietor, at 224, Strand by G. F. CORNFORD; and printed by WOODFALL and KIMBLE, 70 to 76, Long Acre, W.C.